

THE
INVESTIGATORS
in
THE SECRET OF THE
SUNKEN VILLAGE





in

**THE SECRET
OF THE
SUNKEN VILLAGE**

In the small mountain village of Ridgelake in Oregon, young Darren Duff reports seeing a ghostly glow in a nearby lake at night. He invites The Three Investigators to take on the case. Very soon, they learn that in the lake are the remains of a village that was flooded decades ago. During their investigations, they notice the residents behaving strangely, seemingly trying to conceal a secret. The only way for Jupiter, Pete and Bob to proceed is for them to dive to the sunken village.

The Three Investigators
in
The Secret of the Sunken Village

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1. The Bleakest Place Ever

The phone rang. Jupiter Jones, who was sitting alone at Headquarters, answered it.

"The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking."

"Jupiter Jones? Wow, how cool, it's really you, isn't it?" A boy on the other end whispered as if he was afraid of being overheard.

"Uh, yeah. To whom am I speaking?"

"I'm Darren. Darren Duff, from Seattle. Actually, I'm in San Francisco now, but I live in Ridgelake, Oregon. This is all a bit complicated, but I'll explain it to you later. I don't have much time. Anyway, I know you from the newspapers. Actually, The Three Investigators and all. Every time I find something on you, I cut it out. It's totally cool that I'm actually talking to you on the phone right now. Are the other two there? Bob Crenshaw and Pete Andrews?"

"Bob Andrews and Pete Crenshaw. No, they're not here right now. And if you don't have a lot of time, maybe you should get right to the point."

"To the point?" Darren said. "Oh, yes, of course! The thing is this..." Darren lowered his voice a bit more so Jupiter had trouble hearing him.

"I have a case for you! Strange things are happening in Ridgelake. Real scary stuff, I mean. I saw it with my own eyes! You guys should come and see this. It's really incredible!"

"You could arouse my interest by giving me a bit more details, Darren."

"What? Oh, yeah, right. Well, there's a lake here... and people in Ridgelake avoid it. They're kind of scared of it for some reason. That's weird, because... uh... I'll explain this to you later.

"Anyway, I was at the lake... at night. Actually, my uncle probably wouldn't like that as I should stay at home at night, but... oh, wait, I think he's coming home. I just heard his car. He can't know that I'm telling you this."

"Then you'd better get to the important point of your story!"

"What? Oh, yes! I was at the lake, and suddenly the water began to glow. Yeah, really glowing, like it was lava or something—white lava, though. The lake was glowing! It was totally crazy, but also totally creepy, and... wait, my uncle's coming! I gotta go! I'll call you back!"

Before Jupiter could respond, Darren hung up.

The road that wound its way through the narrow valley was little more than a muddy path. The greenery of the field where the red MG passed was deep and wet. Herds of cattle grazed leisurely. Rusty brown water rushed out of the wooded mountains all around. A deep, rain-laden sky arched over everything.

Pete could not remember the last time he had seen a building or even a person along the way. Again the car bumped over a flat stone that was buried in the mud. It almost tore the steering wheel out of his hand. He moaned: "Without an off-road vehicle, this road is a nightmare! This whole area is a nightmare! We are in the middle of nowhere, and if you ask me, fellas, this place is the bleakest place ever. A great long weekend this is, really great!"

Raindrops clapped against the windscreen and within seconds, the sky opened its floodgates. The rain poured down on them as if from a watering can. The rain mixed with the

splashes of mud on the windscreen to form a greasy brown film against which the wipers had no chance.

"I must correct you," Bob replied. "Now it's the bleakest place ever."

"I think you two have done enough grumbling for one day," Jupe said. "It's not as if we're in this miserable place for fun..."

"You hear that, Bob?" Pete said. "He even admits that this place is miserable!"

"Look! We agreed to take on Darren Duff's case and so happens it is in this miserable area of central Oregon," Jupe said.

Jupiter thought back to Darren's second call. His voice had sounded quite normal, and there had been no more talk of the glowing lake. The First Investigator had immediately understood that Darren was not alone and could not speak freely. So he had pretended on the phone that Jupiter was a friend of his who was going to visit him in Ridgelake. Finally, Jupiter had agreed to go and had the way to Ridgelake described to him.

With the long Memorial Day weekend ahead of them, the First Investigator had persuaded his friends to leave California for a few days and drive to Ridgelake to investigate the matter. On the first day off from school, they had left immediately after sunrise and by early evening, they had almost reached their destination.

The roads had been good up to Medford, but this last stretch just wouldn't end. The sun disappeared behind a mountain ridge and never reappeared. Little by little, the bit of daylight that the dense clouds had let through faded.

"If we don't reach Ridgelake soon, we're in trouble. As soon as it's completely dark, we won't be able to find our way around," Pete said.

"The area may be very lonely," Jupiter agreed, "but we are still in a civilized country. Besides, we should be there soon. I'm sure a sign will come up any second."

"You've been saying that for half an hour, Jupe," Bob interjected.

"Well, it looks pretty close on the map," Jupe argued. "But Pete drives so slowly..."

"The reason Pete drives so slowly is because Pete could race down the next slope... and Pete wouldn't find that funny at all," the Second Investigator said.

"But there are no slopes here, Pete," Bob interjected. "We're driving through a valley!"

"Pete also wants to protect his shock absorbers because this road is the worst thing that could have happened to Pete's beloved car. And Pete doesn't want to miss the sign, which according to Jupe should appear any second. That's why Pete drives so slowly."

"It's all right, Pete," Jupiter tried to calm the Second Investigator down. "The sign should really pop up any moment. Anyway, according to the map, we are very close. The only thing that irritates me is this mysterious lake that Darren talked about. It's not even on the map."

"Maybe you should have got an up-to-date map of Oregon instead of pulling that yellowed, tattered 1952 map out of that old crate in the salvage yard."

"1956... and a lake is a lake, Pete. It hasn't just appeared in the last 50 years."

"Then why isn't it on the map?" Pete asked.

"Probably it's too small," Jupiter surmised.

"Can I take a guess?" Bob said. "The lake turns out to be a carp pond, the mysterious glow turns out to be atmospheric pond lighting, Darren turns out to be a weirdo, and our new case turns out to be a flop."

Jupiter sighed deeply. "Go ahead and take it out on me. Blame me out if we've driven from California to Oregon for nothing, but please don't do it until you have a good reason to, okay?"

"There's a sign in front!" cried Pete. "At last!"

The sign post was at a fork in the road. The road to the right was just as bad as the one that they were on. However, the road to the left was even worse. The rusty, dented sign said 'Ridgelake' and was pointed to the left.

"Goodness!" Pete groaned and bent over to catch a glimpse of what awaited them through the thick rain. "I didn't think it could get any worse, but I must have been mistaken. I'm sorry, fellas, but I can't possibly turn left. It's not even a road anymore!"

"Hmm..." mumbled Jupiter. "Are you sure, Pete? Your car can take a lot more than this..."

"I don't want it to take anything, Jupe. I just want it to get me safely from A to B. And since it does that most of the time, I owe it a little consideration and goodwill! If I turn here and keep going, I'll probably get stuck in the next mud hole. I can do without that. I'm sure you can understand that."

"So what do you suggest?" Jupe asked.

"Nothing. Suggestions are your responsibility today. I can't think anymore."

"Then we'll leave the car and walk the last bit," Bob said. "Well, I guess we can walk our way in."

"In this weather?" Jupiter asked. "And without light? And what do we do with our clothes?"

"We have flashlights," Bob replied. "And we come back and get our things tomorrow when it has stopped raining."

"And what about the car?" Jupe asked. "What if it gets stolen?"

Pete laughed bitterly. "By whom, Jupe? We haven't seen anyone in ages."

Jupiter sighed heavily. He estimated from the map that the distance they had to walk was about two kilometres. He had no desire at all to march all the way through the rain. On the other hand, Pete and Bob were right in everything they said. "All right. Then we'll walk."

Pete parked his car as far as possible to the side of the road near the fork. The Three Investigators dug out the thickest sweaters they had and put them on. Then they took their flashlights, got out and set off.

2. The Man in the Water

Now that he no longer had to stare strained at the road, Pete devoted his attention to the surroundings.

To the left, an endless mountain range spread out, which was covered with wet wild fields, grey-purple heather and prickly undergrowth at lower altitudes. In the valleys, where the earth had absorbed the rain like a sponge, dark brown swamp holes yawned. It was a paradise for mosquitoes and frogs... and a nightmare for every other living thing.

On the right side, the country became even more mountainous, and in the distance, behind vast coniferous forests, snow-capped peaks pressed their silhouette into the evening sky.

Silently, The Three Investigators wandered through the wild, lonely landscape until Pete stopped so abruptly that Bob ran right into him.

"Geez, Pete, what's with you?"

"Look over there!" Pete pointed to the left, where the damp hills lost themselves in the dark.

At first Bob and Jupiter didn't see what their friend meant, but then Bob spotted a glimmer of light dancing across the heather about two hundred metres away. The light moved slowly parallel to the road up the mountains.

"Could this be the light that Darren was talking about?" Bob asked.

But Jupiter shook his head. "He spoke of a light in the water. I'm sure that's not what it is."

"Maybe it's a will-o'-the-wisp," whispered Pete. "I have heard that there is such a thing in the moor. Wisp lures hikers into the swamp, where they then sink. We're not exactly in the moor, but—"

"Nonsense," said Jupiter. "That is not a will-o'-the-wisp."

"Then what is it?" Pete asked.

"I don't know."

"Maybe just someone with a flashlight," Bob mused.

"We could take a closer look," Jupiter suggested.

"No," Pete said quickly. "We shouldn't. Who knows what that is? Didn't you see the swamp holes? We'll sink in there anyway! Besides, it's already so dark that we might never find the road again."

Jupiter pulled a face. "Unfortunately, you're right."

Silently, they watched the yellowish shimmer until it suddenly disappeared.

"It's gone," Pete noted. "Probably disappeared behind a hill. So much the better. I want to get to Ridgelake as soon as possible, and it had better be warm, dry and comfortable." He tore his gaze away from the dark hilly landscape and continued on his way.

To the relief of The Three Investigators, it soon stopped raining. After some time, the path led steeply uphill.

"It's a mystery to me," Bob gasped on the way to the top of the hill, "how to get up here in a car. Even with off-road vehicle, you would have your difficulties! Ridgelake can't be that remote. Can it?"

Jupiter wanted to answer, but at that moment, they reached the crest of the hill. In the last bit of twilight light, a mirror-like surface of water spreads out less than a hundred metres away. A lake lay before them. It was heavy, dark and motionless. The shore was lined with a stony, barely visible path. The other side was in darkness.

It was quiet. Strangely quieter than before. It seemed as if the lake were sucking up every sound, or as if the lake radiated silence like a heater radiated warmth.

“Wow,” Pete said. Then The Three Investigators marched silently down to the water, their eyes fixed on the dark surface in fascination.

“I’m afraid we have a problem,” Jupiter said after a while. “According to this map, the town should be here, and this lake does not exist. The lake is so big that it should definitely be on the map.”

“And what does that mean?” asked Pete.

“Either this is the lake Darren was talking about, in which case I don’t understand why it’s not on the map... or we’re completely lost and we’re somewhere else.”

The Second Investigator moaned. “But the sign said Ridgelake.”

“Maybe that’s the name of the lake,” Bob surmised. “Then we would be really wrong.”

“It’s no use,” sighed Jupiter. “We have to go back to the car.”

They were about to turn back when Bob suddenly noticed something out of the corner of his eye. He narrowed his eyes and looked out over the lake into the darkness.

“Look, there’s that strange light again,” he said. “It’s in the middle of the lake now. And it’s moving very slowly.”

“It seems to be floating,” Jupiter remarked, fascinated and began to unconsciously pinch his lower lip. “Strange...”

“I didn’t know that will-o’-the-wisps could also float above water,” Pete said uncomfortably. “Come on, fellas, let’s go back. I feel a little creeped out. Besides, it is almost pitch dark. If we don’t turn back now, we really won’t find the way... and then we’ll end up in the swamp after all.”

“Wait a minute, Pete,” Jupiter held him back, his eyes still fixed on the strange light. “Of course it could just be a fishing boat... or maybe it’s something else.”

“Jupe!” Pete said sternly. “We’re going to get back in the car now and drive along the road in the opposite direction. Then we’ll find Ridgelake and Darren, and he’ll have something warm to eat for us and a comfortable bed. Then everything will be fine. There’ll be plenty of time for everything else tomorrow.”

He didn’t wait for an answer at first, but turned resolutely and climbed up the hill they had come over. His flashlight beam directed at the narrow, rocky path.

Bob followed him, and finally Jupiter too was able to tear himself away from the sight of the yellow shimmering, slightly dancing light hovering over the lake.

Suddenly it became light. Jupiter, who had already reached the crest of the hill, looked back. The weak, glow had disappeared. Instead, now a white, blinding light shone. It seemed as if it came from the lake itself.

“Look!” whispered Jupiter.

Bob and Pete looked around.

“I don’t believe it!” Pete could hardly believe his eyes.

“What is this?”

“It looks like the water is glowing,” Bob said. “Unbelievable!”

Jupiter narrowed his eyes and tried to see more, but the source of the light was too bright and the surface of the water waved and distorted everything into ever-changing shadows.

For a moment, Jupiter even believed that he could make out shapes in the light—walls and roofs seemed to shimmer through the water as if he were looking down on a city from above... but the image flickered blurred like a mirage and soon disappeared again.

But he suddenly saw something else. A shadow had appeared on the shore of the lake, only about fifty metres away from them. There someone stood with his back to them and looked out at the glow. Clothing and posture suggested an elderly man. Perhaps he had been standing there the whole time, but Jupiter would never have noticed him without the strange light.

Pete had also seen the man. “There’s someone there!” he said and ducked involuntarily.

But the man made no move to turn around. He remained motionless for quite a while. Jupiter thought he heard a faint murmur. Suddenly, the stranger took one step into the water... and then another step. As if in a trance, he slowly went deeper and deeper into the lake.

“What’s he doing there?” Bob said. “The water must be freezing!”

In the meantime, the man was already up to his hips in the lake.

“We must help him!” Pete cried and started to move. He ran down the hill. When he reached the shore, the water was up to the man’s chest.

“Hey!” cried Pete. “You there! Hello. Come out of there!”

The stranger did not react, but went on and on.

Pete hesitated for only a second. Then he jumped into the water. The cold of the mountain lake water took his breath away. In an instant, his shoes and trousers filled up and tugged at him like lead weights. But then he had finally reached the man.

“Hello? Can you hear me?” cried the Second Investigator.

The man turned around.

Pete was startled. The stranger had a wrinkled, sunken face. Snow-white hair was sticking out from under his cap. He seemed to be over eighty years old. His eyes were ice blue. Confused and deeply frightened he looked at Pete.

Then he whispered a name: “Charlie? So young...”

“No, my name is Pete Crenshaw. You need to get out of the water right now or you’ll freeze to death. Let me help you.” Pete grabbed him by the upper arm and pulled him gently back to shore.

The man struggled to defend himself. “But it’s time!” he protested and turned to the light. But at that moment, the white light faded in the water, and the lake sank into darkness.

“What’s your name?” Pete asked as he struggled to pull the man out of the water. He looked so feeble that Peter feared he would pass out. Under no circumstances should that happen.

“Paul,” the man murmured. “Paul Brooks.”

“We’re almost there, Mr Brooks. Just a few more steps. You see those two flashlights up ahead? Those are my friends, Jupiter and Bob. We are here to help you. Our car is not far away. And from there we’ll take you to the nearest town where you can be looked after.”

“Ridgelake,” mumbled Mr Brooks. “I am from Ridgelake. Just over the next hill.” He pointed in the opposite direction that the three boys came from. So Bob was correct, the sign post was pointing to the lake and not the town.

“So much the better,” Pete said. “That’s where we are going.”

The last steps out of the water were the most strenuous. The wet clothes pulled on them like a thousand hands. But then they finally made it.

“Is he all right?” Jupiter asked excitedly and helped Pete to support Mr Brooks.

"I don't know," Pete said. "He has to get out of those wet clothes right away... and so must I. We have to go back to the car."

As quickly as they could without overtaxing the old man, The Three Investigators climbed over the hill and moved towards the road. Mr Brooks wheezed and stumbled again and again that Pete was afraid that he would collapse. He wouldn't have been surprised. His own feet and legs were numb with cold and he was shaking all over his body. How could Mr Brooks have fared?

"Mr Brooks," Bob began cautiously. "Why did you get in the water?"

But Jupiter gave him a warning glance and quickly said: "We should now concentrate on getting to the car and then get to Ridgelake. There'll be plenty of time for everything else later. Right, Mr Brooks?"

Paul Brooks nodded weakly.

Finally, they reached the car. The Three Investigators helped the man into the car and Pete drove off. Quickly, he turned on the bumpy road and had mud splashed to all sides of his car. He then drove into the right fork.

The road went straight on for two kilometres, then it made a wide turn around a grassy hill. Suddenly the village appeared before them. There was a weathered sign that said: 'Ridgelake'.

Ridgelake was smaller than The Three Investigators had expected. There were only one wide road and a handful of narrow roads. The houses were all built of wood. It could be seen that when they were new, they had looked radiant and stately. But that was many decades ago. The paint had long since flaked off and had never been renewed. And the wood had soaked with water and had become dark and stained.

The MG bumped over a threshold that marked the transition from the muddy track to the tarred road. The asphalt was cracked and riddled with potholes poorly filled with gravel.

"Where shall we take you, Mr Brooks?" Jupiter turned to the old man. "To your home or..."

Paul Brooks no longer responded. He was trembling all over and seemed not to have heard the First Investigator's question.

"Stop at that restaurant over there," Bob decided. "I'll go in and ask."

Pete stopped and Bob got out of the car quickly. His eyes fell on the worn wooden sign, which was dangling above the door on a rusty bar. It said 'Rainbow Pub'.

"Charming name," Bob muttered.

He pulled open the heavy door and entered the dark pub that smelled of beer and smoke. The sparkling lamps above the counter gave off very little light. At a table in a dark corner, two old men hunched over beer glasses. Above their heads hovered a bell of blue haze. When they saw Bob, the two men's conversation died down and they stared at him. Somewhere an old country song was playing tinny on the radio.

Bob was just about to turn to them when suddenly a brown shadow jumped out from behind the counter, yapping and running towards him. Bob instinctively pulled an empty chair up and put it between him and the dog which was building up in front of him growling and with ruffled neck fur.

Thumping footsteps approached. The owner came out of the kitchen through a narrow passage behind the counter. He wore a stained apron, which twenty years ago might have been white, and which now bulged over his huge belly. His face was unshaven, and the little hair that remained stuck to his skull in long, yellowish strands.

“Zero!” he called the dog, and immediately the drooling monster returned to his master. Then the man sparkled at Bob under bushy grey eyebrows. “You lost?” he growled.

“No, sir, I’m not lost. I need your help. My friends and I just picked up an older gentleman who lives here, Paul Brooks. Do you know him?”

“Paul? Sure I know him. But I don’t know you. Who are you?”

“It’s not important right now,” Bob said. “Mr Brooks fell into the mountain lake. We rescued him from the water. He is not well. He needs to see a doctor or a hot tub. Is there a doctor in Ridgelake?”

The owner stared at him with surprise and disbelief, seemingly thinking about whether to believe even a word of Bob’s story.

In the meantime, the two men at the table had also become very attentive. “What did the boy say, Joe?”

“Where is Paul now?” Joe asked Bob.

“Outside in the car.”

“Daniel, come with me!” he called the weaker of the two men and stomped towards the door. Daniel followed him.

Bob turned to the remaining guest and asked: “Can you tell me if there’s a doctor here?”

“Well, there’s a doctor, yes” the man murmured, “but she’s not from around here—”

“Do you know where she lives?”

“Of course.”

“Then could you please go get her?”

3. Darren

As soon as Joe realized that Bob was telling the truth, he took care of Paul Brooks. He and Daniel took the old man back to his house just down the road. The Three Investigators followed them. Joe and Daniel changed Brooks, put him in his bed and covered him up to his chin with a thick blanket. By now he was no longer responsive. Again and again, he was shaken by shivering fits. Then finally the doctor came.

Dr Jenny Holloway was a small, stocky woman with short, unkempt hair and wore clothes more suited to a drover than to a doctor. Impatiently, she pushed aside The Three Investigators and the two men to get to Mr Brooks.

“What happened?” she asked curtly.

Joe raised to a wordy explanation of how Bob had stormed into his shop and talked crazy stuff, but Jupiter simply interrupted him and briefly told him the most important facts.

“Okay,” said Dr Holloway. “Now get out of here. All of you... And for you...” She pointed at Pete, “get in the hot shower now!”

Then she chased The Three Investigators, Joe and Daniel, out of the room with an impatient hand movement.

Out on the street, Daniel quickly trotted back to the Rainbow Pub, but Joe stayed and frowned at The Three Investigators. “Do you think I’m stupid? You guys aren’t telling the whole truth. You’re up to something and you better tell me what it is.”

“Well, listen,” Pete complained. “What do you mean by that? I rescued Mr Brooks from the lake and you’re accusing us—”

Jupiter laid a reassuring hand on his shoulder and took over. “What my friend Pete wants to say is that we can talk in more detail another time as right now he needs to take a hot shower.”

“Oh! And who would let you three brats into his house?” Joe scolded, but The Three Investigators ignored him and went back to the car. “Hey!” Joe yelled after them.

“You shouldn’t leave your pub unattended for so long!” Jupiter called back without turning around. “There are still some guests sitting there!” Then they got into the car.

“And now quickly to Darren!” Pete said trembling. “Where did you say he lives again?”

“Near the town hall,” replied Jupiter. “At least that’s what he said on the phone.”

They drove along the main road. It consisted mainly of a grocery store, a petrol station and the Rainbow Pub. Apart from the pub owner, who shouted nasty insults after them, there was not a soul to be seen in the dim light of the street lamps. But all three of them felt that shadows were moving at all windows and their arrival in Ridgelake had not escaped anyone’s notice.

The road led to a square where a small wooden church painted white stood. Right next to it was the stately town hall, on the front of which a large clock had stopped at five past twelve. These were the only two buildings in the whole town that still had a touch of its old glory. On the façade of the town hall, the light blue paint had flaked off and some of the shutters rattled in the wind.

“Here we are,” Jupiter said, got out and looked up at the building.

Suddenly at an adjacent building, the front door was ripped open and a boy, who might be a little younger than themselves, rushed into the street. His clothes slobbered on his body as if he wanted to grow into them first, and his brown hair stood off uncontrollably in all directions. When he spoke, he did it very quickly, hectically and quietly, as if he feared being overheard. "There you are at last! It is you, isn't it? The Three Investigators? Stupid question, who else would you be?"

"It's us," Jupiter said and introduced himself and his friends. "And you are Darren."

"Right. Darren Duff. I'm glad you're finally here. I thought you'd never get here. Any problems? Geez, what happened to you, Pete? Did you fall in some water somewhere?"

"Something like that," Pete replied and began to tremble again. "But it would be great if we could tell you all this later. I need to warm up first."

"I see. Sure. Come on in." Darren led them into the house.

To the relief of The Three Investigators, it was warm and extremely cosy inside. The creaking floorboards were covered with thick, fluffy carpets, and the old furniture had a slightly musty smell but was somehow cosy.

Darren immediately showed Pete the bathroom on the second floor and the Second Investigator hurried to get into the hot shower.

Meanwhile, Darren, Bob and Jupiter climbed up the narrow stairs to the third floor where the guest room was located. Darren opened the door to a sparsely furnished but warm room. There were three folding beds. "It's not exactly luxury, but—"

"That's quite enough," Bob sighed, put his bag down and let himself fall onto the bed exhausted. Jupiter did the same.

"What a day!" Jupe moaned. "First, the long journey by car, and then..." He exchanged a quick glance with Bob.

"Yeah, exactly, what happened?" Darren asked. "Why was Pete so wet?"

Jupiter and Bob alternately reported to Darren about the wrong turn they made and Paul Brooks, whom Pete had saved from the lake. They did not say anything about the mysterious light.

"Paul Brooks?" Darren asked, amazed.

"Do you know him?"

"Sure, he's a friend of my great-uncle's. That's incredible! And he just stepped into the water like that? Without any reason? He hardly wanted to go swimming! The lake is freezing cold!" Darren had started walking up and down the room. "Of course, it could have something to do with why I called you. Goodness, I've got so much to tell you, I don't even know where to start!"

From the street, there was the sound of a car approaching. Darren went to the window and looked out. "Here comes my great-uncle Cedric. Do not be surprised at him. He's a bit unworldly, but otherwise, he's all right."

"What are you doing living with him?" Bob asked.

"We are moving from Seattle to Los Angeles. And my parents thought that I was just in the way of the move, so they sent me here to Ridgelake for two weeks. It sucks here, but at least I don't have to go to school. Oh, yeah, my uncle thinks you guys are friends from Seattle coming to visit me. He doesn't have to know you are investigators."

Steps were already coming up the stairs, and a little later, the door was opened.

"Darren? Imagine what I just heard. Old Paul is... Oh... Your visitors have arrived."

"Hello, Uncle Cedric. This is Jupiter and Bob from Seattle."

Cedric Duff was an unusually tall man with thick white hair and a sunken face. His gaze was erratic, as if he did not like to look at the visitors straight in the eye.

“Good day, sir,” Jupiter said politely.

“Shouldn’t there be three of you?” asked Mr Duff.

“Yes, Pete is still—” Jupe began.

“Here I am,” Pete cried, and suddenly he was standing in the doorway, dressed only in a towel. “Oh,” he said as he glimpsed Mr Duff. “Excuse me.”

“Pete needed to warm up,” Darren explained. “Because he—”

“—Fell in the water?” Mr Duff guessed. “Then you were the boys who rescued Paul from the lake? I was just at the Rainbow Pub, and Daniel and Joe told me everything.”

“Actually, it was Pete alone,” Jupiter explained to him.

Mr Duff stepped up to the Second Investigator and shook his hand. “Thank you, my boy!”

A little surprised by his own emotional outburst, Mr Duff let go of Pete’s hand immediately and looked away embarrassed. “Don’t worry about Joe. He’s just a little rough around the edges, but he’s a good guy at heart... But you’re gonna have to get some rest now, don’t you? You can tell me all about it tomorrow. I’ll leave you all alone. If you’re hungry... well, Darren knows what to do.” He gave them a quick nod and left the room.

“The news make its way around very quickly,” Pete remarked after the steps on the stairs had faded away.

Darren shrugged his shoulders. “It’s just a village.”

“How are you, Pete?” Bob asked anxiously.

“Fine,” Pete replied, hurrying to get dressed. “The shower did me good. I’m a little worried, though.”

“Well,” Jupiter said, “you can always go to Dr Holloway in the morning, just to be safe.”

“Not about me,” Pete interrupted him reluctantly, “but about us! We haven’t even arrived in Ridgelake yet and we were already in the middle of strange events again! Even before we know anything more about our case, I jumped into icy mountain lakes and rescued old people tired of life. Not to mention the completely mysterious light effects that—” Pete noticed the warning look of the First Investigator too late. “Bummer! I shouldn’t have said that, should I?”

“I would have preferred to wait a little longer with this part of the story until we had heard Darren’s version,” Jupiter said, slightly upset.

But Darren jumped at it immediately. “You saw a light?” he shouted excitedly. “By the lake? Like, the water glows white?”

“That’s how it was,” Jupiter said and told Darren in short words what he had kept from him earlier.

“Darn!” Darren cried and started pacing the room again. “And I didn’t see it! But I couldn’t go there today as I had to wait for you here! On the other hand... thank goodness you saw it! At times, I thought I was crazy, you know? I thought what would happen if I called The Three Investigators all the way from Rocky Beach, and in the end it turned out that there was nothing here. Perhaps I had hallucinations, that there were no lights and all that stuff! But now you’ve seen it too! This is... this is amazing! This is really—”

“Darren...” Jupiter tried to stop the flood of words, but it was in vain.

“That’s really awesome!” Darren continued. “What do you think, can you solve the case? I mean, sure you can, it’s probably your easiest exercise, but I mean, in this short time! How long are you guys gonna stay, anyway? I forgot to ask you on the phone, Jupiter. If you can’t stay that long, we should start the investigation immediately, right? Preferably tonight... or do you think nothing more will happen today? After all, something has already happened. That could mean that it’s over and that tomorrow it will be—”

“Darren!” cried Jupiter.

“Yeah?”

“If you want to support us, do two things. One—stop pacing back and forth and sit down!”

Darren stopped walking back and forth and sat down.

“Two—please tell us your story calmly and objectively and in the right order! And three—do you have any food in the house?”

4. The Phantom of Ridgelake

Darren Duff had known Ridgelake since childhood. His father was from the village, but had moved away when he was old enough. But every now and then, the family returned to Ridgelake for a few days to visit Darren's great-uncle Cedric. Darren was always terribly bored. There were no children here, and the adults had always treated him like an intruder, especially Joe Wilcox, the owner of the Rainbow Pub, who could not stand Darren. The feeling was soon mutual.

"And now I've been dumped in this town for two weeks," Darren continued. "I'm telling you, there are really cooler things! I hardly know Uncle Cedric, we haven't been here very often. And there's just nothing to do here!"

"Anyway, I was bored to death after only two days and was wandering around. I had misjudged the time a little and didn't start back until nightfall. I walked past the lake, everything was pitch-dark, and suddenly it was bright as day. The water itself was glowing, so UFO-like. It stayed like that for about half an hour, but unfortunately I didn't have my binoculars with me, otherwise I might have seen more. And then it was suddenly dark again, just like before. Totally creepy."

"Did you observe anything else suspicious?" Jupiter asked.

"Isn't that suspicious enough?"

"I mean, something that we might have missed."

"Well," Darren hesitated. "When the lights went out, I thought I heard voices. But they were far away and I couldn't understand anything... or maybe I just imagined it. In any case, that was three days ago. And I immediately thought—this is a case for The Three Investigators! So I called you the very next morning. Yesterday and the day before, I went to the lake too, but the light didn't come back on. So what do you think?"

"About what?" Pete asked.

"Well, about everything! Something is going on here! Something scary! And that's what you guys specialize in, isn't it? Is this a case for The Three Investigators or not?"

The Three Investigators looked at each other. A broad grin had already settled on Jupiter's face. "A mysterious light, a tired old man, voices at the lake... that sounds just to my taste!"

It was almost noon the next day when The Three Investigators were torturing themselves. The last evening had become very long, as Darren had been pestering them with questions about their detective career so far. Now they were still tired while Darren was getting impatient. But Jupiter first insisted on a hearty breakfast else his brain wouldn't get going at all, he told Darren.

As they entered the kitchen, Mr Duff was sitting at the table, bent over, looking away from his newspaper over the edge of his reading glasses.

"Good morning, Mr Duff," Jupiter said politely. "I think I forgot to thank you last night for hosting us for a few days."

Cedric Duff nodded and folded his newspaper. "It's all right, boy, it's all right. I've got a lot of work to do anyway, and I'll be down in the study most of the time. I won't even know

you're here."

Slowly, as if he first had to prepare his body for the impending exertion, he lifted himself up from his chair, took the newspaper under his arm and shuffled out of the kitchen. There seemed to be nothing left of his interest in the previous day's events.

Darren looked at his great-uncle with concern. "He's getting really old. He's a lot slower than he used to be."

"What does your great-uncle do?" Bob asked. "Isn't he retired already?"

"Didn't I tell you? He's the mayor of Ridgelake," Darren replied and set about breaking half a dozen eggs into the pan. "That's why he lives here next to the town hall building... but it sounds better than it is. Only a hundred people live in Ridgelake or so. I guess sooner or later everybody's gonna take turns to be the mayor.

"And he would actually have retired long ago, but there are hardly any younger people in Ridgelake who could take over the office. My mother always says that Ridgelake is dying out. About half the houses in the village are already empty. And in the other half are old people who barely leave the door. It's really creepy sometimes, you know, a ghost town. The old ones bite the dust one by one, and no one new comes along."

"Don't people here have children?" Pete asked.

"Yes, they did, but they all moved away. Just like my father did when he was old enough. Nobody stays in Ridgelake any longer than they have to." Darren put the pan with the scrambled eggs on the table. They were a little over-salted, but The Three Investigators still went at it ravenously.

"I'd like to know how Mr Brooks is doing," Pete mumbled after they had eaten everything.

"We should pay him a visit," Jupe suggested and gave Darren a questioning look.

Darren seemed disappointed. "You want to see Paul Brooks? I thought we'd get right into the investigation."

"This is investigation," Bob tried to convince the boy. "After all, Mr Brooks has seen the light as well as we have. He may have information that will help us."

"I hardly think so," mumbled Darren. "Paul's a bit crazy, you know. All you can really talk to him about is the weather. Everything else he says is crazy."

"Even if he did," Pete said. "I'd still like to know how he's doing."

The Three Investigators got ready for a visit to a sick person and ten minutes later, they entered the deserted market place. Ridgelake was so tiny that it was not worth driving around. They walked the short distance to Mr Brooks's house. But on the way they only saw Daniel, the man who had helped take Mr Brooks home. He looked at them blankly through the window of the grocery store where he worked.

No one else was around. But just like the night before, The Three Investigators couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched from behind drawn curtains.

Finally, they stood in front of Mr Brooks's little grey house. Some shingles had fallen down and broken on the street, and the two little trees that stood to the left and right of the door in large flowerpots had died ages ago. There was no bell, so Pete knocked gently on the wood of the door.

After a while, he heard footsteps, then the door was opened. In front of them was Dr Holloway. Her hair was dishevelled, and her face was colourless and tired. She looked as if she hadn't slept all night.

“Oh,” she said, “the youthful heroes. Do you want to come in?” She led the boys into the living room, where dirty dishes stood around and the smell of pipe tobacco stuck in the air. “Coffee?”

The Three Investigators wanted some, but Darren refused.

“So you three fished Paul out of the lake, huh?” Dr Holloway asked, as she put on a kettle of water. “Who are you anyway?”

“Friends of mine,” Darren quickly explained. “They’re visiting me while I’m with my great-uncle. It was pure coincidence they discovered Paul. They got lost on the way. They thought the sign along the road meant Ridgelake the town, not Ridgelake the lake.”

Dr Holloway nodded slowly. “And do you know why Paul went into the lake in the first place?”

“We would like to know that ourselves,” replied Jupiter. “Didn’t he say anything?”

She shook her head.

“How is he?” Pete asked, worried.

“He has a fever,” said Dr Holloway. “Not life-threatening, but Paul is an old man. The fever makes him very fragile. He sleeps most of the time. He’s always awake for a few minutes and then he talks crazy stuff.”

Dr Holloway sighed. “I was with him all night. I’ll probably spend the next few days taking care of him. Paul no longer has any relatives, like most people here in Ridgelake. I will probably bury them all one by one and be the last one at some point. Sometimes I feel like there’s some kind of a curse here. It’s like coming to a place that’s doomed.” She shook her head.

The kettle began to whistle and she got up to take care of the coffee.

“You’re not from Ridgelake yourself, are you?” Jupiter asked.

“Did Joe Wilcox tell you that?” Dr Holloway asked.

“Not him. Another man at the pub told me that you were not from here,” Bob replied. “What brought you here?”

“My grandmother lived in Ridgelake...” Jenny Holloway explained. “After I studied medicine, I came here to see her often when she was sick. At some point, I had to take care of her permanently, because there was no doctor in Ridgelake. Little by little, I also took care of the other villagers because the old people often couldn’t make the long way to Medford when they were sick.

“Finally, my grandmother died and I was stuck here. I did not want to abandon the village. But although I have been taking care of the people here ever since, I am still considered the newcomer, and the one who doesn’t belong here, even though I live here... I’ve only been in Ridgelake for ten years.” She laughed, but it didn’t sound cheerful.

Silence spread until Pete asked: “May we see Mr Brooks?”

Jenny Holloway looked doubtfully at The Three Investigators and Darren. “Paul needs one thing above all else—peace and quiet.”

“It’s just for a moment,” Jupiter said.

She sighed. “All right. But not all of you. Only two—you and you.” She pointed to Pete and Darren. “You saved him, and he might recognize you, Darren. The rest of you wait here.”

The doctor led them both to the bedroom. “But only for a few minutes,” she whispered and opened the creaking wooden door. Mr Brooks was small and sunken in his enormous bed. Dr Holloway left Pete and Darren alone.

They went up to Mr Brooks’s bed. The old man had sweat on his forehead. His breathing was shallow and he seemed to be asleep. But when a wooden floorboard creaked under Pete’s

feet, he opened his eyes trembling and looked around without immediately noticing the two boys.

“Hello, Mr Brooks,” Darren said softly. “It’s me, Darren Duff, remember me?”

But Paul Brooks’s eyes found Pete first. Slowly, he reached out a trembling hand from under the covers. Pete came closer, sat on the edge of the bed and reached for his hand. It was dry and hot.

“Good afternoon, Mr Brooks. My name is Pete...”

“Charlie,” Brooks gasped softly, and his eyes flickered in disbelief as he looked at Pete. “You’re finally here, aren’t you? To pick me up.” Mr Brooks’s voice was quiet and fragile. Pete wasn’t sure if he understood the old man right.

“I’m sorry, Mr Brooks, but my name is not Charlie.”

Brooks didn’t seem to hear him. “The light of your soul... I walked right into it. So cold... but now it’s warm. Hot! Dreadfully hot, which we all... deserve. I’m so sorry, Charlie... but the children... the children are safe. The children are fine. Sarah took care of them. Don’t worry, Charlie. Your children are safe...” Then Paul Brooks fell silent and his eyelids closed. His breath was calm and steady.

“He fell back asleep,” Darren whispered after a while.

“Do you know what he was talking about, Darren?” Pete asked.

Darren shook his head. “I haven’t the faintest idea.”

Then the two of them went back in the living room.

“So?” Jupiter asked.

“He was conscious for a moment,” Pete said. “He mixed me up again, just like last night, with someone called Charlie.” He turned to Dr Holloway. “Do you know who he could have been referring to?”

“Charlie?” Jenny Holloway’s look was unfathomable.

“You know him?” Pete asked.

She shook her head. “I don’t know who Charlie is. But I’ve heard the name mentioned before.” She lowered her voice as if she feared being overheard by Mr Brooks in the next room or someone else. “No one talks openly about Charlie, but when people get sick, they sometimes say things they would otherwise keep quiet about—for example, in a fever or when they’re struggling with death. I often sit with them, and it’s had happened that they talk about Charlie... but I’ve never been able to find out who this Charlie is.”

“What do people say?” Bob asked curiously.

“Some are afraid of him. Others ask him for forgiveness.”

“Forgive what?”

“I don’t know. To me, Charlie is the Phantom of Ridgelake—a spirit that lives in people’s hearts.”

“But that sounds more like an evil spirit,” muttered Pete uneasily.

“Oh, yes,” confirmed Dr Holloway. “A very bad one. It haunts people in their worst dreams, and sometimes, if the fever doesn’t go away, it can lead to death.”

5. On the Lookout

Pete breathed a sigh of relief after they had left Paul Brooks's house and slowly walked back to the town hall under a leaden grey sky. "Fellas, I hate to say it, but that was actually a little too scary for me. Evil spirits bringing death, I don't know."

"Dr Holloway was speaking metaphorically," Jupiter replied.

"Meta what?"

"Figuratively. She didn't mean at all that evil spirits are killing people here, but that people on their deathbeds sometimes talk about this ominous Charlie," Jupe explained.

"I know what she meant," Pete replied. "But that doesn't make it better! This place is really creepy."

"Yes, isn't it?" Darren joined the conversation. "Because I agree. Maybe it really is a kind of curse, like Dr Holloway said. You know, the village is slowly dying out and so on. Maybe it's all connected somehow, you know, with the lights and the lake and Paul and Charlie."

Jupiter thought Darren was putting a little too much into one pot, but he swallowed his comment. "As soon as the sun goes down, we'll go to the lake and see if we can find out more," he promised.

When The Three Investigators and Darren left the house that evening, the rain clouds had still not moved. But for the moment it remained dry. They shouldered the backpacks in which they had stowed their equipment and set off for the lake.

Darren knew a shortcut across the hills. They climbed over the barbed wire of an old, long collapsed pasture fence and reached the lake within fifteen minutes under Darren's expert guidance.

Although this time they knew what to expect, the sight of the mirror-smooth water surface had lost none of its fascination. But there was nothing to see of the mysterious light. A strange silence lay over everything. The four boys had taken cover behind a hilltop to gauge the situation.

"The light came from there," Darren said, pointing forward.

"The best thing is to spread out as evenly as possible along the bank," Jupiter suggested. "This way we can better locate the light when it comes up. And maybe we'll make different observations from different points."

"Okay," Pete whispered. "I'm going with Bob to the other side, you two can stay here."

The First Investigator cleared his throat. "Actually, I thought everyone should go separate ways so that we can cover more ground."

Pete swallowed. "Every man for himself? But isn't that something... risky?"

"Pete. It's just a light," Jupe said. "Until now, anyway."

"What if something happens?" Pete continued.

Jupiter took the backpack from his shoulders, opened it and pulled out a black box. "That's why we have these."

"What is this?" asked Darren.

"Walkie-talkies. We have one for you too."

“Oh, that radio-telephony thing?” Thrilled, Darren picked up his walkie-talkie and had Jupiter explain it to him. Then they discussed who should take a stand where.

The lake was very long. It was too far to the western end. But since the light appeared both times in the eastern half, they decided to limit themselves to this side.

Jupiter stayed on the spot, while Darren left with Bob and Pete to take the lead. He knew his way around best and led them halfway around the lake.

After about two hundred metres, Bob stayed behind and ducked behind a bush. Another two hundred metres away, Pete took position on a rock directly on the shore of the lake. Shivering, he pulled the zip of his jacket up to his chin and looked as Darren went a little further. First his outline disappeared in the darkness, then the sound of his footsteps on the stony shore path faded away.

Pete looked around. Behind him, the conifers frayed the horizon. In front of him lay the deep black lake. It was almost dead quiet. Only the weak surf was rippling through the gravel, and every now and then, a fish jumped out of the water. This was mixed with the faint static rustling of the walkie-talkie that he had set to receive.

Suddenly a voice came out of the device. “Hi, folks! It’s Darren! Just checking if this thing works?”

“First to Darren—obviously, it works, yes. What about the others?”

“Third to all—I can hear you well,” Bob said.

Pete pushed the talk button. “Second to all—me too. All is quiet here. No light in sight.”

“Then I guess we’ll just have to wait and see,” Jupiter said.

They waited. Pete slipped restlessly back and forth on the cold stone and finally got up to walk up and down to warm up a little.

Darren said over the walkie-talkie: “I think it’s totally crazy lying in wait here with you. It’s totally criminal. Nothing happens. It’s weird, right?”

Pete giggled, but he couldn’t think of anything to say.

But Jupiter, as so often, was not at all shy about an answer: “It would be appreciated if you would use the frequency only for important, case-related observations.”

“Yes, uh, sorry, Jupiter. I mean... First.”

Again there was silence. Pete looked at his watch. They had only been here for half an hour, but he felt as if half the night was already over. He was tired, and he was cold, his feet were already lumps of ice.

Suddenly Bob said: “Guys, do you see that too? There’s something out there!”

Pete crouched and stared out at the lake with narrowed eyes. At first, he only saw the reflection of a single star that had managed to break through the cloud cover. But then suddenly, the yellow light they had seen before appeared behind a rock. It hovered above the water and slowly glided towards the middle of the lake. This time it seemed much closer, but it was too weak to see anything in its glow.

Pete reached for the radio. “I see it. I think I’m pretty close. What do we do now?”

“Wait and see,” Jupiter’s voice came out of the walkie-talkie.

After a while, Pete had the feeling that the light had stopped. Strained, he stared. Did he hear voices? Or was that just the light breeze in the bushes?

The light flashed up so suddenly and was so bright that Pete was literally dazzled. It seemed as if the lake had caught fire. In the centre, its water shone in a glaring light in which strange shapes danced and swayed.

Pete was still much too baffled to react in any way when suddenly a loud voice sounded right next to him.

“Guys, you see that? Did you see that? I knew I wasn’t crazy! What are we gonna do? What are we gonna do now? Now tell me, you are investigators, you must know what to do in such situations! Answer me! Hello? Hello? Are you still there? Jupiter? Hello? Oh, damn, I gotta take my finger off the talk button.”

It didn’t take half a second until Jupiter announced himself in a subdued voice: “What are you doing shouting around like that, Darren? You can be heard all over the lake even without a radio! You shut up now, understand? We’re not doing anything. Everyone stay at your posts. Over and out.”

There was a second of silence as Pete tried to calm his heartbeat.

Then the light went out and the mountain lake sank again into leaden darkness. Pete automatically reached for the walkie-talkie, but suddenly he heard a soft splash. Was that a fish that made the sound?

Pete listened intently. For minutes, it remained silent and pitch dark. The Second Investigator had just decided that he could now use the walkie-talkie without danger, when he heard something again, a strange rhythmic splashing, which certainly wasn’t from a fish. The splashing slowly came closer. Pete crouched behind the rock on which he had crouched and stared strained into the darkness.

Less than ten metres away from him, a black figure rose from the lake. Shining and dripping, the terrible figure staggered towards him, with eyes as big as tennis balls, a huge hump on his back and a gait like Frankenstein’s monster!

6. The Silver Box

Pete could just suppress a scream and pressed himself deeper into the shadow of the rock. The figure came closer, staggered splashing ashore and turned to the side.

Now Pete realized that it was not a monster, but a diver. The hump was in reality a scuba tank, the huge eyes were diving goggles, and the waddling gait was created by the scuba fins on his feet.

Unfortunately, Pete was not any less scared because of this. A diver in the middle of the night in a mountain lake was at least as scary as anything his imagination could imagine. Yet he could not take his eyes off the wet, shiny figure.

A second diver, who looked no less scary, rose from the water. He pulled something behind him on a rope. A large shadow slid across the water. It was a black row boat. It crunched and ran aground.

Silently, the divers approached the boat and freed themselves from the scuba tanks, the weight belts, the diving goggles, the fins and the neoprene hoods. Under one of them short, blond hair appeared, under the other long, dark hair. They were a man and a woman, both in their fifties.

"Say something, Carl," the woman whispered.

"What can I say?" murmured Carl. "I think you're hysterical, that's what I would say."

"But there really was something, believe me! I admit, yesterday I wasn't quite sure, but today I heard someone calling out! Right after you turned on the light!"

"And what do you suggest we do now, Joan? Shall we call off the operation?"

"I'm not talking about that, Carl. We came here to solve the mystery of Cassandra and find her silver box, and that's what we're gonna do... but we must be more careful."

"We are already careful. That's why we dive at night, remember? During the day, there's always that old coot roaming around... but even after dark, it's not safe here."

"Maybe we should try again with the diving lights," Joan suggested.

"We've tried the diving lights a few times, Joan!" thundered Carl. "It'll take us weeks to comb the lake with these things." He furiously tucked his gear under the seat of the boat.

"What if we get spotted by one of those geezers? Maybe by that Joseph that we're supposed to watch out for? That's who Cassandra was obviously trying to keep a secret from. I am not prepared to risk the contents of the silver box lightly! The people of Ridgelake must not find out what we are doing here, so we must be careful." Joan took off her wetsuit and quickly slipped into warm clothing that had been in the boat.

"It's all right, Joan," Carl said calmly. "I didn't mean it that way. Let's talk about it later."

That was as far as Carl could get because at that moment, Pete's walkie-talkie suddenly buzzed, announcing a message from one of his friends. As fast as lightning, Pete's hand grabbed the device and switched it off. Motionless, he held his breath.

"What was that?" whispered Carl, alarmed. "Did you hear that too?"

"Something buzzed," whispered Joan. "Over there. Maybe just a bird in the bushes, but..."

"But maybe something else," Carl suspected.

Careful steps approached the rock behind which the Second Investigator was crouching. Pete suppressed the impulse to simply run away. A flashlight was switched on. Its beam wandered over the stony shore and came closer and closer.

Suddenly, a distant call echoed across the lake. There were no words to understand, but a voice that Pete recognized immediately—Darren!

The light went out immediately.

“There really is someone here,” whispered Carl.

“That’s what I’ve been saying all along!”

“The voice came from over there.”

“We’d better get out of here before we’re discovered,” Joan said. “Come on, help me with the boat!”

In a hurry, Joan and Carl grabbed the row boat front and back and lifted it up groaning, only to carry it up the grassy embankment a bit. Further up, dense blackberry bushes grew. They pushed the boat deep into the undergrowth and finally hid their tracks with loose thorny vines. Then they shouldered the scuba tanks and hiked further uphill until they disappeared behind the next hill.

Pete breathed a sigh of relief. He could have gone after them. But he didn’t want to push his luck. He’s had enough excitement for one day. Let the others take care of the rest.

The others! Pete reached for the radio and turned it on. At the moment, he was in the middle of a hectic conversation between Jupiter, Bob and Darren. All three were absolutely over the moon.

“—Now where you were just now, Bob. Where were you?”

“I have no idea where I am, Darren.”

“I’m on the way back.”

“Jupe, what about you?”

“I’m not seeing you. I don’t see anything, in fact. It’s just too dark here. Hurry!”

“What do you think we’re doing!” gasped Bob. “But I don’t want to run into anyone either!”

Pete pushed the talk button. “Guys! Calm down! It’s okay.”

“Pete!” it squawked from the speaker. “Is that you?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“What happened?” Jupiter wanted to know.

“It’s best if I tell you when we meet,” Pete said. “So move on back, or you’ll never know!”

“On my way!” Darren cried.

Bob reached the Second Investigator first. Then Jupiter, completely out of breath, came from the other side. And finally Darren, who had to walk the furthest.

Everyone pestered him with questions. Pete reported in detail what had happened. “The two of them almost... found me. If Darren hadn’t started calling... Why did you do that, Darren?”

“Because you stopped in touch! I thought something had happened, so I called for you, but Jupiter... well, you know, he—” Darren looked down in shame.

“I rebuked him over the radio,” Jupiter said coldly.

“You crushed him,” Bob corrected him.

“And rightly so,” Jupe said. “We were in the middle of a fact-finding mission. You don’t just yell and scream like that!”

“Well,” Pete interjected, not liking the sudden change of mood. “Darren saved me, after all.”

“Pure luck!”

“Maybe, but...”

“Okay, let’s forget the whole thing,” Jupiter reluctantly relented. “But in the future you will follow our instructions if you want to stay with us, Darren, do you understand?”

Darren nodded eagerly and was surprisingly silent.

“Good. Now let’s take a look at this boat that the two divers have hidden up there,” Jupiter decided.

Pete led them to the blackberry bushes. They listened into the darkness for a while and looked across the hills, but the two strangers seemed to have gone.

Carefully, so as not to leave any traces, they freed the hidden boat from the thorny vines. Jupiter shone the flashlight into it.

It was a simple wooden boat. Inside were two equally simple oars, the diving masks and the rest of the divers’ equipment. Under the seat were two large devices stowed away. The First Investigator went closer.

“Well, well, well,” he said.

“What is that?” Pete asked as he couldn’t quite make it out.

“This is a halogen spotlight—a waterproof halogen floodlight, to be exact. And an equally waterproof cable leads to this car battery. Well, fellas, I’m afraid we’ve already solved the mystery of the glowing lake in a very unspectacular way. If I am not mistaken, the spotlight was simply attached to the underside of the boat and switched on... like this...” Jupiter reached for the switch. The spotlight flared up in a brightness that made Bob, Darren and Pete groan.

“Man, Juve, what are you doing!” Pete gasped.

Jupiter switched the light off again. “I just wanted to see if it was as bright as it needed to be to search the bottom of a lake.”

“It is,” Pete said.

“But why did they only dive for half an hour three days ago?” Darren wondered. “If they’d just stayed under water all night, they’d be much further along!”

“You can’t dive as long as you want,” explained Jupiter. “When diving, nitrogen builds up in the blood stream and other tissues. It becomes dangerous above a certain level. To break down the nitrogen you have to return to the surface and stay there until the effects go away.”

“What if you don’t do it?”

“You can get health consequences—for example, through decompression sickness, nitrogen narcosis or both. They are caused by nitrogen but have very different symptoms. Nevertheless, they are not pleasant,” Juve said.

“Here’s something else,” shouted Bob, who in the meantime had continued to inspect the boat.

It was a piece of plastic sheeting that somebody had carelessly thrown into a corner. Inside was an old black and white photo. Bob held his flashlight up to it and looked at it closely.

It was a photo of a young woman. She was wearing an old-fashioned hat and an equally old-fashioned house dress and was standing in a kind of marketplace in front of a church made of stone with a wooden bell tower. Shyly she smiled into the camera. In her hands, she carried a silver, decorated box about the size of a book.

"It is only a rough guess, but I am so presumptuous to claim that the lady in the photo is Cassandra," said Jupiter.

"And that the box she carries under her arm is the object of desire," Bob added.

"Exactly," Jupe said. "Too bad we can't take the photo with us, but we shouldn't leave any trace."

Bob put the foil with the photo back into the row boat, and together they restored the hiding place to the way they had found it. Darren then led them over the hills back to Ridgelake.

"What's going to happen now?" he asked excitedly. "What are we gonna do next?"

"Investigate," replied Jupiter. "About the lake, about Ridgelake, about a woman named Cassandra, a man named Joseph and a silver box. And..." He fell silent.

"Was there something else you wanted to say, Jupe?" Bob asked.

"Yes. There's something else I haven't told you." Again Jupiter fell into silence.

"What, Jupiter?" Darren asked.

"I had binoculars in my backpack. With them I observed the yellow light, but it was just too dark to see anything. Then when it suddenly got bright, I saw something on the surface of the water."

"And what was that?" Pete asked worriedly. He didn't like Jupiter's tone of voice.

"Well," the First Investigator murmured. "It is difficult to describe it adequately... without any misunderstanding, if you know what I mean."

Bob rolled his eyes. "Just say it, Jupe!"

"Well... there was something sticking out of the water... and it looked like a head. A... uh... non-human head."

7. A Severed Non-Human Head

“Excuse me?” cried Pete. “What do you mean non-human? Nessie, or what?”

Jupiter shook his head. “I had to focus the binoculars first, and then I lost the object for a moment. Shortly afterwards it was dark again. In other words, I only had a second or two in which I could see it clearly. So, I can make a mistake. But the head, or whatever it was, didn’t look very much alive. More like something floating lifelessly on the water.”

“Wait a minute, let me get this straight,” Pete asked. “Are we talking about a severed non-human head?”

Jupiter sighed. “This is exactly what I feared, Pete. I don’t know what it was. I only told you what it looked like to me.”

Suddenly, Darren burst out laughing.

The Three Investigators looked at him in bewilderment.

“What’s wrong now?” Pete asked without understanding.

But Darren could hardly get himself together again. “I know what you saw,” Darren finally said. “And it certainly wasn’t a head!”

“No?” Jupe wondered.

Pete sighed in relief. “Whatever it was, it can only be better than a severed non-human head. Tell us, Darren, what was it?”

Instead of answering, Darren pulled the spotlight out of the boat again, directed it to the middle of the lake and turned it on. A glaring beam of light shone across the reflecting water surface. “Look at it!”

Jupiter pulled out his binoculars. It took him a while to discover the object. But this time he recognized what it was.

Silently, he handed the binoculars to Bob. Bob gave them to Pete.

“A weathercock?” Pete asked in astonishment and lowered the binoculars. “Why is there a weathercock sticking out of the water? These things are usually attached to church spires and nowhere else!”

“It is,” Darren replied, turned off the spotlight and put it back in the boat. “On the spire of Ridgelake’s church, the Church of Sacred Heart.”

“The Ridgelake’s church?” Pete remarked. “Now I don’t understand anything. I thought it’s right over there in the village.”

“No, I mean from the old Ridgelake.”

Jupiter was the first to realize. “Wait a minute! Are you saying that there’s a church over there in the water?”

Darren laughed. “Exactly.”

“Huh?” Pete shook his head in confusion. “Have you gone completely crazy? Why is there a church? Who builds a church in a lake? Are you crazy?”

Now Bob also understood what the others were getting at. “Of course! This lake is not a natural lake, but a reservoir! Once there was only a river here... Then a dam was built and the river rose up and formed the lake. Sure, that’s why the lake was not marked on our old road map! When the map was printed, the lake did not even exist. Am I right, Darren?”

Darren nodded.

Everyone looked out over the lake. Pete tried to imagine the valley without it. “Do you mean to say that in this valley, once upon a time there was a river and a village?”

“It’s still there,” Darren said. “It was flooded from the reservoir and is now underwater. Only the weathercock on top of the spire still sticks out.”

“Fascinating,” muttered Jupiter, still looking into the darkness. “The dam is back there, on the west side, isn’t it? But it’s too dark to see. That’s why we didn’t notice it last night.” Then Jupiter suddenly became very serious. “But tell me, Darren, when were you planning to tell us about the dam?”

“Tell you?” Darren wondered. “Well, I thought... it’s no secret. Everybody here knows that lake is part of a reservoir and—”

“We’re from California, Darren, and we’re here because of you! Do you realize that the fact that we’re dealing with a reservoir could be crucial to solving this case? What else haven’t you told us, Darren?”

“I...” Darren stammered intimidated. “Nothing else, I think.”

“Are you sure? Why don’t you think again?” Jupe urged.

Darren said nothing more.

“I can’t believe it!” Jupe exclaimed. “All this yelling just now, and then you’re holding out on us.”

“He just forgot, Jupe, don’t make such a drama out of it,” Bob said calmly. “It’s not that bad, we haven’t got very far with our investigation anyway.”

Jupiter mumbled something incomprehensible and stuffed his binoculars back into the backpack.

Pete cleared his throat. “Maybe it’s time for us to go back. I’m getting cold.”

Silently they started their way back. Pete tried to defuse the situation by bringing up the case again. “Say, I still don’t quite understand about the reservoir. Was an entire village really flooded? Were they crazy? There were people living there!”

“Dams are built to generate energy,” Jupiter explained objectively. “The water pressure drives turbines—”

“I know that,” Pete interrupted him. “But that still doesn’t explain what happened to the people.”

“They were relocated,” Darren continued sheepishly. “To the new Ridgelake, which was built from scratch. That is the Ridgelake you know.”

“It’s completely insane,” Pete thought. “And when did this happen?”

“About fifty years ago.”

Bob giggled. “By this time, I’m sure some people have racked their brains over the weathercock... But I wonder if anyone has ever gone for a... what was it again? A severed non-human head?” Bob’s giggle turned into a snorting laugh.

Pete had to laugh along, only Darren held back with a timid side glance at the First Investigator.

Jupiter got a red head. “I would like to point out that in such situations the brain tends to fill in the gaps in knowledge by using the imagination to form a plausible overall picture. For lack of the necessary background knowledge, it is therefore quite possible that in a state of stress one creates images that are perhaps a little out of touch with reality—”

The further explanations of the First Investigator were drowned in the roaring laughter of the others.

The next morning, The Three Investigators met Mr Duff again at the breakfast table. Darren had asked them not to tell his great-uncle about their nocturnal adventures. He was sure his uncle wouldn't think much of his wandering around the reservoir in the middle of the night.

But Cedric Duff seemed to be listening with half an ear anyway, waiting for an opportunity to escape the uncomfortable company of four young people as elegantly as possible. He succeeded in this after he had gobbled up his eggs with bacon. He looked out of the kitchen window at the street and said: "Oh, here comes the postman. I'm gonna open the door for him." And he was out.

"Are you sure it's okay for us to live here, Darren?" Pete asked uneasily.

"Yeah, don't worry about it. My great-uncle is not a great humanitarian. Don't take it personally."

After an extensive breakfast, Jupiter decided to find out more about Ridgelake. His rage of last night had subsided, and as a kind of peace offering he asked Darren for advice while clearing the breakfast table. "There's gotta be some kind of archive on Ridgelake here at the town hall, right?"

"There is. On the ground floor with all the files belonging to the town hall."

"We must learn more about the village and the lake," Jupiter said. "And above all, we should try to find out who Cassandra and Joseph are. With any luck, there's something about them in the archives."

"I have to ask my great-uncle if we can look around. But if I tell him you are investigators, he might get suspicious."

"Just tell him we're working on a school project about dams," Bob said. "School projects always work. Adults are so enthusiastic about the idea of young people getting involved in school that they throw all scepticism overboard."

Darren was impressed with the casualness with which Bob came up with the excuse. He enthusiastically went to look for his uncle and returned a short time later. "All right, we can browse the archives as much as we want as long as we put everything back where it came from afterwards."

"Bob will browse," Jupiter decided. "That falls within his area of responsibility."

"Does it always have to be this way? Always me," Bob moaned. "What are you gonna do in the meantime?"

"We'll go back to the scene of the incident and see if we can find out anything more in daylight," Jupe said.

Bob was about to start another protest when suddenly there was a downpour. Thick raindrops pelted against the window and within seconds covered the world in a grey veil.

"Okay," Bob said. "Done. Have fun." He left the kitchen smiling.

8. There is No Charlie!

On the way to the reservoir, Jupiter, Pete and Darren stopped by Mr Brooks for a short while, but the old man was not better yet. He was asleep, so they simply sent their best wishes for his recovery through Dr Holloway.

Luckily the rain was short-lived. When the three of them reached the reservoir, the water surface was still churned up by the rain, but shortly after that, it was just dripping.

The lake looked just like the evening before, only with the difference that at its western end, they now saw the straight, cloud-grey dam wall which had been driven into the landscape like an axe.

Slowly they walked towards it. Pete kept looking for the weathercock for so long and finally saw it in the middle of the lake. "Over there is your severed non-human head, Juve."

Jupiter pretended not to have heard the remark and Darren suppressed a giggle.

The dam wall was huge. Only when they stood at the point where the concrete bored itself into the landscape could they appreciate the sheer size of the structure. Deep below them, water sprayed from the wall into the landscape, forming the river that had been there centuries before the dam. It flashed here and there between the tree tops and lost itself in a densely wooded valley as if it had never been interrupted.

For a while, they looked silently into the landscape, taking in the sight of the monstrous structure. Then Pete discovered a small building that had been constructed at one end of the dam. "What's that, Darren?"

"Sort of a control centre," Darren explained. "There are all sorts of equipment in there. Paul Brooks used to work here and oversee all this stuff."

"Really?" Pete asked astonished. "I wouldn't have believed him at all. I thought he won't even know how a pocket calculator works."

"You don't know that either," mocked Jupiter. "Only how to operate it."

"Mr Brooks once showed me his old place of work," Darren continued. "The power plant is now centrally controlled by a large facility some distance east of here. It also monitors other reservoirs in Oregon. It's done all by computer, but old Paul still comes here every day to check up on things, even though there's not much to check up on. Sometimes he stands for hours at the dam wall. I think he misses his old job."

"The old geezer," Pete said.

"That's not very nice, Pete," Darren thought.

"No, I mean... Joan and Carl were talking about an old geezer who roams around here all day. That's why they only dared to dive in the lake at night. They must have meant Paul Brooks."

Jupiter nodded. "You are probably right. But it didn't help much. Mr Brooks saw them anyway. And it almost cost him his life."

Suddenly a fat man stepped forward from behind the control building. He had a brown, drooling giant dog in tow, which immediately started to bark and obviously wanted to pounce on Jupiter, Pete and Darren. He was only prevented from doing so by the tightly stretched leash.

Joe Wilcox let himself be pulled by his dog to the three boys with a grin and only stopped when the animal was already standing on his hind legs and his snapping mouth was only twenty centimetres away from Jupiter's thigh. A gust of wind had ruffled Wilcox's carefully combed yellowish hairs over his bald head, so that they were now hanging stringy from his ear without him noticing.

"Here we have our young visitors again. So, now tell me, boys... What exactly happened here the other night? And who are you, and what are you doing here?"

Three harmless questions, thought Jupiter, but he had not the slightest desire to answer them.

"Our friend Bob already explained this to you the day before yesterday," replied Jupiter.

"That you just happened to be here at the reservoir that night and watched old Paul go into the water? You expect me to believe that story? Ha!" As if by chance, Wilcox loosened the leash a bit, so Zero managed to wipe his dirty front paws on Jupiter's jeans.

"I honestly don't care what you believe, sir," Jupe answered back.

"Now don't be cheeky, boy," Wilcox thundered. "Or else I'm going to get you! If I'd talked like this to a grown man in my day..."

"Please spare me that, Mr Wilcox," Jupiter said as calmly as possible. "You wouldn't believe how often I've had to listen to this old-man speech. Each time it is the same pathetic attempt to conceal one's own insecurities and inadequacies."

"... Then you should have learned something," Wilcox repeated helplessly, apparently not understanding half of Jupiter's reply. "If I find out what you've done with poor Paul—"

"We saved his life!" Pete said angrily.

"Saved his life? I was with him! He's in a coma!" Wilcox said.

"You exaggerate excessively," said Jupiter. "We also visited him yesterday and today. He sleeps a lot, but he's not in a coma."

"You visited him?" Wilcox's anger was replaced by vigilance. Only now did the man seem to notice his dog tugging on the leash like mad. "Zero," he hissed, tugging at the leash. Immediately the dog obeyed and sat obediently next to his master. "So was he conscious?"

"At times," Darren replied. "He talked funny."

"What stuff?"

Jupiter gave Darren a warning glance, but by then it was already too late.

"Something about 'the light of a soul'. And he thinks Pete is a certain Charlie. I wonder who he meant."

Joe Wilcox looked at Pete closely as if he were trying to understand Mr Brooks's mistake. Then his hostility returned.

"Charlie?" he cursed. "There's no Charlie, understand? And I'll have a serious word with your great-uncle, Darren! I can't believe you brought these guys here who have no business being in Ridgelake! If you were my grand-nephew, I'd knock your block off. Now get out of here! I don't want to see you out here anymore!"

Jupiter, Pete and Darren turned to leave. Jupiter went on to say: "I would recommend anti-aggression therapy to you, Mr Wilcox, if I did not know that this kind of psychological treatment is rarely successful at your age. Quite apart from that, it requires a certain insight on the part of the patient... and I can't see any sign of that in you."

"Shut up and get out!" Wilcox yelled, and Zero started barking again.

The three boys strolled back as calmly as possible.

"Why did you throw that at him?" Darren whispered as they were out of earshot.

"For no particular reason except that Jupe must always have the last word," Pete replied.

"He didn't understand me anyway," said Jupiter, "or he is just a misanthropic creep."

“I don’t know what ‘misanthropic’ means, but I agree with the creep,” Pete said quickly.

“But his outburst was interesting, wasn’t it?” Jupe continued. “So there is no Charlie... or he knows a lot more about Charlie than he’s willing to admit. I should have dropped the name ‘Cassandra’ just to see his reaction... but somehow there wasn’t an opportunity.” Jupiter smiled viciously. “Perhaps next time...”

9. The Shrinking Village

“There you are at last,” Bob cried when Pete, Jupiter and Darren returned two hours later and entered the file room where he had spent the morning. “What took you so long?”

“We went round the whole lake,” explained Jupiter, who was completely exhausted. “We thought maybe we could find something revealing, but nothing came up. The boat is still in its hiding place. The rain has washed away all traces, if there were any. So we don’t know where Joan and Carl went last night.” The First Investigator slid down the wall, exhausted, until he sat on the hardwood floor. “What a forced march!”

Pete and Darren didn’t look a bit exhausted. “I thought it was a refreshing walk,” the Second Investigator said gleefully. “We also had an interesting encounter.” He told Bob about Mr Wilcox. “And you? What about you? Well. This certainly looks like work.”

Bob sat at a huge mahogany desk with a green felt mat and had piles of files and folios piled around him. “It is. I dug through the Ridgelake archives and got a little perspective.”

“We are listening,” Jupiter reported from the ground without lifting his head.

“Well, the history of the village is not particularly exciting,” Bob began. “In the past, the people of Ridgelake lived mainly from raising cattle. The green slopes of the valley were ideal pasture land for the cattle. But then the state of Oregon came up with the idea to get a part of its energy supply from hydroelectric power plants and to build dams. Four were planned, three were eventually built, all in southwestern Oregon. The Clearwater River valley proved to be ideal for a dam project. Unfortunately, Ridgelake was in this valley. The village was to be flooded, but of course, the residents didn’t want that.”

“And then what?” Pete asked and looked over Bob’s shoulder to get a glimpse of his notes.

“Then the big poker game began,” Bob continued. “The people of Ridgelake were offered money to give up their village and build a new one elsewhere or move away completely... but the Ridgelakers were a very strong community.”

“Meaning they fought against the dam project?” Pete asked.

“‘Fought’ isn’t exactly the word,” Bob explained. “No, they decided at the very first of many town council meetings on this issue that they would only accept a unanimous decision. No one should be resettled against their will. Only when all the residents had agreed to the dam project would they give the green light for resettlement and construction of the dam.”

“And that worked?” Jupiter asked.

“After enough money had been made, yes,” Bob said.

“How much money?” Jupe continued to probe.

“That is not written anywhere here, but it was obvious enough that in the end, all the residents accepted the offer. You cannot forget that the vast majority of residents here were simple farmers. The prospect of a new house immediately made them forget their doubts. So finally the dam was built, and with it the new Ridgelake. The residents moved to the new village, and the old one was flooded.

“But many Ridgelakers left their homes completely. With the money they received as compensation, they saw their chance for a new beginning and moved to a larger city or a

completely different state. Of the 312 residents of the old Ridgelake, only 221 eventually moved to the new Ridgelake. And that was basically the beginning of the end.”

“Why is that?” Jupe asked.

“Because after that, there were never again 221 people living in Ridgelake. The number steadily decreased. I looked at the population registers, which are made once a year. It’s just like your mother said, Darren—Ridgelake is dying out. It’s like there’s a curse on the village. There’s hardly been any children born in the last fifty years, and when there were, the young families often moved away, leaving the old to die one by one. At present, Ridgelake has just under 87 residents, most of them over sixty, and none under forty.”

“Creepy,” Pete thought. “A village full of old people.”

“And there’s no trend reversal in sight. In fifteen years, there’ll only be a handful of hermits left, and in another fifteen, Ridgelake will be a ghost town.” Bob put his notepad out of his hand and pushed a few files together.

“There’s one more thing I found in my research,” he continued. “The archives of the town hall are meticulously sorted. However, there is a gap. Two issues are missing from the monthly community newsletters—the ones that come just before and just after the resettlement.”

“Perhaps there were no newsletters because everyone was busy with the move,” Pete surmised.

“Not really. The newsletters are numbered... and two numbers are missing,” Bob said. “And not only that... there’s also the Medford newspaper, the *Medford Tribune*. It is also found in the archives because it’s the most important newspaper for this region. It is almost complete, I should say, because here too, a few issues from the exact same period are missing.”

“Strange,” mumbled Jupiter. “Can we ask your great-uncle about this, Darren?”

“We can at least try,” said Darren.

“Good.” The First Investigator, who seemed to have recovered somewhat, picked himself up off the floor and stepped to the window to look out over the deserted town hall square. “So much for the history of the village. What about Cassandra? Did you come across that name in your research, Bob?”

Bob nodded and pulled out another piece of paper. “Yes. There was a Cassandra in Ridgelake. Born 1935, died recently, three months ago. Her full name was Cassandra Spencer. I didn’t find out much about her. Cassandra must have been a rather modest and devout woman... but she was very musical. Every Sunday she played the organ at Sacred Heart, the church of Ridgelake, for the church service. That’s why she is mentioned a few times in the parish newsletter. She was married in her mid-twenties and seemed to have been a good housewife from then on, but she remained childless. She died of cancer last winter. That’s all.”

Jupiter, Pete and Darren looked at each other disappointed.

“That’s all?” asked Jupiter. “Is that really all?”

Bob grinned and shook his head. “Not quite. I have another photo of her here. It was in the parish newsletter when the old Ridgelake was still standing and Cassandra was a very young woman.” He showed them the yellowed edition of the newsletter, which was published about half a century ago, and was now dry and brittle as ancient foliage. On one side was a small article about Cassandra Spencer and her role as an organist. In gratitude for her work, the congregation had given her a gift—a silver box to keep her hymn book. A photograph was also on the page—Cassandra holding the box in her hand in church square.

“This is the photo we found in the boat of the two divers,” Pete cried in amazement.

“Indeed!” Darren got all excited all of a sudden. “Man, wow, that must be some serious evidence, huh? But... what do we do with it?”

“It is indeed proof,” Jupiter agreed. “But only to prove that we are on the right track. It can’t be a coincidence that the divers carried this photo of all things. It does indeed seem to be about the silver box. And it’s at the bottom of the lake.”

“Do you think the divers are looking for Cassandra’s hymn book?” Pete asked doubtfully.

“They are looking for the box, and in that box may be anything. But since we know so little about Cassandra Spencer, anything more is just speculation. Too bad you couldn’t find out a little more about her, Bob. So far, it’s all pretty thin.”

“Oh, now that you mention it,” Bob cried, pretending to be absent-minded. “There is something else.”

Jupiter, Pete and Darren bent over curiously. “He saved the best for last,” said Pete. “Speak up!”

Bob grinned happily. “Cassandra was only known as Spencer until she was twenty-five years old. After she got married, she was known as Cassandra Wilcox!”

10. Battle Plans

“Oh, my goodness!” cried Pete. “Cassandra was the wife of Joe Wilcox, the owner of the Rainbow Pub!”

“That’s right!” cried Darren. “My great-uncle mentioned in passing that Wilcox’s wife had only just died.”

“Joseph,” Bob said. “His full name is Joseph Wilcox. Joe’s just his nickname.”

“Joseph?” Pete repeated. “The Joseph that divers should beware of? The one Cassandra wanted to keep a secret from?”

“It has to be him.” Bob replied.

“This is very revealing,” Jupe thought and smiled contentedly. “Good work, Bob! Now we have more than I dared hope for! Let’s sum up—it seems that Cassandra Wilcox possessed something valuable. It was in a small silver box. The divers are looking for it. And Joe Wilcox is not to know anything about it, lest he should claim the box himself. After all, it belonged to his wife.”

“A treasure!” cried Darren. “She’s hiding a treasure! And she didn’t want old Joe to find it! Crazy!”

“But that leads us directly into a moral dilemma,” Bob said. “If our suspicions are correct, then Joe Wilcox is probably the rightful owner of this box. He was married to Cassandra. After her death, he would be entitled to everything she owned. If we continue in this case, we automatically help Joe Wilcox.”

“Oh,” Pete and Darren said at the same time, and the high spirits suddenly disappeared.

“We can’t choose that,” said Jupiter. “But one thing at a time. First we should find out more about this box. The best way is to retrieve it.”

It took a few seconds for someone to respond. During this short break it started raining outside again, and thick drops ran down the dirty window pane.

“Wait a minute,” Pete finally said. “Retrieve it? You mean like... diving down there?”

“In what other sense do you think I mean, Pete?”

Bob sighed.

Darren clapped his hands enthusiastically.

Pete moaned. “We don’t know this lake at all! You know how dangerous diving in unknown waters can be. Besides, we don’t have any equipment!”

“It doesn’t seem too dangerous, after all, Joan and Carl have been down there. And as for the equipment, we can get that. It’s not that far from the coast. I’m sure there are dive centres there where we can rent some. We can do that today.”

“Today?” cried Pete in horror.

Darren was thrilled. He couldn’t get that big grin off his face. “We’re diving for treasure! I knew it would be exciting when I called you!”

“You can’t be serious, Jupe!” Pete argued.

“Pete, relax. We all have a diving licence and enough experience,” Jupiter reminded the Second Investigator. “What could happen?”

Pete sighed. “The famous last words... Carl said it would take weeks to comb the whole lake! What makes you think we’ll have better luck?”

The First Investigator smiled indulgently. “Once again, luck has little to do with it, Pete, I’m afraid you forget that far too often. If you wanted to hide something valuable, where would you do it?”

Pete shrugged his shoulders at a loss. “I’m not in the mood for guessing games, Jupe, just tell me what you want to do.”

“You would hide it at your home,” continued Jupiter. “Yes. And?”

“And Carl and Joan probably have no idea where Cassandra’s home was back then,” Bob said.

“Neither do we,” Pete quipped.

“Not yet,” Jupe said. “But we have a distinct advantage.”

“Oh, what is that?” Pete asked.

Jupiter made a gesture that encompassed the whole room. “This. We’re at Ridgelake Town Hall. It shouldn’t be hard to find out exactly where Cassandra Wilcox lived at that time.”

“In fact, I’ve already done that, Jupe,” Bob replied. “In my research, I came across an old, hand-drawn map of Ridgelake. Cassandra Wilcox lived in a small wooden building next to the church rectory.”

“You see, that shouldn’t be hard to find underwater. So, here’s my battle plan—we’ll go down to the coast today and get some scuba gear. We’ll drop you off in Medford on the way, Bob.”

“You want me to go to the archives of the *Medford Tribune* and look up the missing issues?” Bob guessed.

“That’s right.”

“Man!” Darren marvelled. “You three are really fast! Then I’ll go with Bob and help him look, okay?”

“That’s...” Jupiter began benignly, but then he caught Bob’s pleading glance. Almost imperceptibly, Bob shook his head. “... Not a good idea,” Jupiter finished the sentence.

Darren did not even try to hide his disappointment.

Jupiter immediately felt pity. “For you I have another task.”

“Yeah? What?”

“You can try to find out more about Cassandra here in the village,” Jupe said. “... For example, what kind of person she was, what kind of life she led, and so on. The more we know, the better we can then draw conclusions about the contents of the silver box. The people here in the village know you better than us, so it won’t be so obvious if you ask around.”

“Ha!” Darren said. “Do you know what you’re doing? I’m under sixty, which makes me suspicious of all the villagers.”

“Then ask your great-uncle,” Jupiter suggested. “You’ll think of something!”

“Exactly!” Bob agreed and looked at the clock. “And we really should get going, otherwise we’re not gonna make it, fellas.”

Five minutes later Jupiter, Pete and Bob left the house under Darren’s pitiful looks and got into the MG. When their client had finally disappeared in the rear-view mirror, Bob sighed in relief. “Oh, man! Darren’s really nice and helpful and everything, but—”

“—But he can also be a pain in the ass,” Pete continued. “He’s even worse than I am with his exaggeration!”

“And who would have thought it was even possible,” Jupiter smiled. Then he suddenly discovered Dr Holloway in the street. She was carrying a heavy wicker basket full of purchases from Daniel’s little shop.

“Stop the car, Pete!” Juve instructed.

The Second Investigator stopped the car and Bob rolled down the window. “Good morning, Dr Holloway! That bag looks heavy. Can we give you a lift?”

“That’s nice of you boys!” Dr Holloway said in relief and came up to them. Bob quickly got out and got over to Jupiter in the back seat so that Dr Holloway could take a seat in the front. “I live at the end of the street,” she said and pointed to the left into a side path. “It’s only two hundred metres, but it’s very steep.”

“It’s no problem,” Pete said and drove off. “How is Mr Brooks?”

“A little better. His fever’s down. He sleeps most of the time, but it’s much quieter than yesterday. That’s why I can leave him alone for a few hours and go back to my own life and my empty fridge.” She pointed to her shopping with a smile.

“Did he say anything else?” Bob asked. “About the lake, I mean?”

She shook her head. “I live right over there. The yellow house. Well... the old yellow house.”

Pete stopped at the door and Dr Holloway was about to get out, and Jupiter asked: “Did you know Cassandra Wilcox?”

Dr Holloway remained seated. “Of course I knew Cassandra. I know everyone here in Ridgelake. And I looked in on her every day when she was so terribly sick. It’s been quiet here in the village since she left us. But what makes you ask about her?”

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “We have heard a lot about her.”

“Really? I find that hard to believe. She was a rather quiet person.”

“Didn’t you say it got quiet without her?” Pete asked.

“Yes. But that’s because you don’t hear her playing the organ anymore. Every day in church, she’d sit at the organ. Her favourite music was by Bach. She loved the organ. Cassandra freed Ridgelake from its silence for at least a few hours a day. It was an escape for her, I think. When she sat at the organ, she didn’t need to be at home with her horrible husband. You’ve already had the pleasure of meeting him. He really bullied her.”

“Do you know why they got married then?”

She laughed bitterly. “That’s what you wonder about a lot of couples. No, I don’t know. I guess Cassandra didn’t have a choice. Her parents had died young, as far as I know. And it was just about impossible for a young woman in the country in those days to live alone. So she married Joe Wilcox.

“It certainly wasn’t love. He didn’t treat her very well, although I also heard that it had been different in the very beginning. At the start of their marriage, Joe must not have been such a bad guy, as hard as I find it to believe. But then something happened, and nothing was the same after that.”

“Something happened?” Jupiter asked. “What do you mean?”

“Word has it that she cheated on him.”

“You mean Cassandra was seeing someone else?”

“No, no! Not cheated on with another man. There must have been something else. During the time the dam was being built, she betrayed him. A money story, according to some rumours. But I really don’t know anything for sure. Anyway, after that she took refuge in church and music and got further and further away from the rest of the world. But why are you interested in all this?”

“We...” Jupiter began uncomfortably, “we’re onto something.”

“On the trail of something, well, well. Playing a little detective, huh? I can understand that. For guys your age, Ridgelake must be the epitome of boredom. Well, I gotta get going. Good luck with whatever you are doing. Maybe you can solve the secret of Ridgelake.” Dr Holloway opened the door and got out. “And if I may give you any advice, don’t go asking Joe Wilcox himself. He’d have that crazy mutt of his on you... or he’d pull out that rifle.”

Just as she was about to slam the door, Jupiter held her back once more.

“Dr Holloway! What do you mean, the secret of Ridgelake? Is there one?”

She hesitated long before she answered: “Every place has its secrets. And Ridgelake has a big one, that’s for sure. But I’ve lived here for ten years and haven’t been able to figure it out. To really understand the secret of this place, you must have spent your life here, I think. It lies very, very deep.”

Dr Holloway smiled sadly at them. “Thanks for the ride.” She closed the door and went into her house.

11. In the Broom Closet

When Pete and Jupiter returned to Medford in the afternoon, Bob was already waiting for them in front of the *Medford Tribune* building. As soon as he got into the car, Pete was already flooding him with news.

“Man, what a day! Bob, I’m telling you—Oregon is not California! Who knew it was so difficult to rent scuba gear, but we finally found a dive shop! California is full of surf shops and scuba diving equipment and so on. But in Oregon? Nothing. It’s a total desert.”

“Oregon’s not exactly a paradise for divers,” Bob said.

“Anyway, it all took forever,” Pete said.

“And how much equipment do we have now?”

“Two,” replied Jupiter.

“Only two?”

“I will stay upstairs and supervise the operation,” Jupe decided.

Bob and Pete threw a meaningful glance at each other.

“How is it possible that you still sound like the leader even when you don’t actually do anything?” Bob asked mockingly.

“What have you found out?” Jupiter evaded the question.

“One thing above all—that Ridgelake really is completely unimportant. It’s almost never in the newspapers. But in the issues that were missing from Town Hall, there was a report.”

“And what is that?” Pete asked.

“There has been a fire. A few weeks before the dam was built, a house burned down completely. One person was killed, a family man. The cause of the fire was never determined—probably an overturned oil lamp in the nearby stables.”

“Is that all?” Jupiter asked when Bob stopped speaking.

Bob nodded. “Unfortunately, yes. It was only two short paragraphs and a photo of the burnt-out house. I copied that report, but there’s nothing special about it.”

Before Jupiter could take a look at the photo, his mobile phone rang. He answered it.

“The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

The voice at the other end was hardly to be understood, because in the background a dog was barking all the time. It took a while until Jupiter recognized Darren’s voice.

“Darren? Is that you? What’s going on with you? Where are you?”

“Jupiter! You have to help me! I’m in trouble!”

“What kind of trouble?” Jupe asked.

“I’m in Joe Wilcox’s broom closet right now... and in front of it is his mad dog. He’s probably about to bite his way through the door.”

“Excuse me?” cried Jupiter. “What are you doing in Wilcox’s broom closet?”

“You told me to investigate.”

“In his broom closet?”

“No, in his house. But I missed the mutt. He slept in Wilcox’s bedroom. When I opened the door, he realized I wasn’t Wilcox... I had to take refuge in the broom closet.”

“You went into Wilcox’s house just like that?” cried Jupiter in bewilderment.

"That's what detectives do," Darren defended himself. "You told me yourself how many times you've entered the homes of suspicious people!"

"But..." Jupiter started and didn't know what to say. "But this is something completely different!" ... even though he knew it wasn't true.

"It doesn't matter now. You have to help me! Wilcox isn't here. But he may come back any minute."

Jupiter moaned. Then he said: "Darren, we are on our way. Stay where you are!"

Jupiter hung up and turned to the Second Investigator. "Pete, step on it!"

Pete accelerated and drove as fast as the bumpy road allowed, which unfortunately was not very fast.

Jupiter called Darren every five minutes. But the third time, Darren said: "Jupiter, don't do this anymore! As soon as the phone rings, the dog goes completely crazy!"

"Look out, Pete, there's a car ahead," Bob said when he noticed a rickety old Jeep on the road.

"Don't try to overtake him," Jupiter advised. "The road is too narrow. It won't work."

Pete drove up as close as possible, but then he had to admit that Jupe was right. With nerve-racking longevity, the Jeep bumped in front of them and threw dirty rainwater against the windscreen of the MG.

"Oh, no!" Bob suddenly said.

"What is it?"

"Wilcox."

"What about Wilcox?"

"He's in that Jeep."

"Excuse me?" Pete was staring through the dirty windscreen. Now he also recognized the pub owner's bull neck and stained lumberjack shirt. "Bummer! What do we do now? If I don't overtake him, then Darren will be in big trouble!"

"Then overtake him!" urged Jupiter.

"Didn't you just say the road was too narrow?"

"Since when do you care what I say?"

Pete squint his eyes together and waited for the right moment.

"Come on, Pete!" urged Bob. "It's only a short distance to town!"

"You want to take over?" Pete snapped.

Bob kept quiet.

Then the moment was right. Without any warning, the Second Investigator stepped on the accelerator, the car made a jump and raced past the Jeep. The tyres were slashing through wet grass, and mud was spraying all over the place.

Pete pulled the steering wheel hard to the right and the MG jumped back on the track like a predator. The Jeep was behind them. Wilcox blared his car horn and flashed his high beams, but Pete simply accelerated and quickly left the Jeep behind him. "It's done," he sighed.

"He'll catch up with us once we get to Ridgelake," Bob said. "And then he's gonna go crazy!"

"We'll deal with that when the time comes," Jupiter said. "First, we have to put Darren out of his misery!"

They reached the signpost that had led them astray for the first time. A little later, Ridgelake appeared before them.

Pete drove into the village and stopped in front of the Rainbow Pub. "Is this even the right house?" he asked. "Is this Wilcox's home too?"

Jupiter pulled out his mobile phone and dialled Darren's number.

A few seconds later, a fearsome barking sounded from the apartment above the Rainbow Pub.

"Yes," Jupiter said and hung up before Darren could answer the phone. "And now let's go! We've got two minutes at the most before Wilcox gets here. We've got to distract the dog somehow."

Bob was already out of the car. He was running towards the front door. He couldn't think of anything better to do than to ring the bell. Immediately, Zero freaked out again up in the apartment.

Jupiter's phone rang. He answered it.

"What are you doing?" Darren yelled in panic.

"We'll try to distract the dog."

"You're not distracting him, you're driving him crazy! If I come out of the closet now, he'll tear me apart!"

"Darren, how did you even get into Wilcox's place?"

"I pushed a window up on the ground floor—at the back of the house."

"Okay, we'll save you now," Jupiter decided. "Somehow." He hung up.

"Pete, you have to go through the back window."

"What? Are you stupid? Why me?"

"Because you're the fastest! Now move it, we don't have a second to lose!"

Pete jumped out of the car, circled the house and immediately found the open window. Behind it was a narrow staircase leading up from the pub on the ground floor to the apartment. The Second Investigator ignored his raging heartbeat and climbed in.

It only took a second for Zero to realize there was a second intruder—one that he might be able to tear apart faster. Pete heard him running through the apartment when the drooling animal jumped through the open apartment door and raced down the stairs, straight at him.

Pete tried to jump back outside the window, but his foot got caught and he fell into the ground. The dog started to jump and shot through the open window. At the last second, Pete picked himself up and ran back to the car, the dog was only a few metres behind him.

The Second Investigator tore open the door and wanted to jump into the car, when Zero snapped shut. Pete cried out. He was shocked, as he noticed with relief, because the dog had only got his trouser leg. Pete broke free. The trousers made an ugly noise. Then he was free. He jumped into the car and threw the door shut. Not a second too soon. The dog jumped into the car like a prey and pressed his dirty paws against the side window. He barked and showed his big yellow teeth, from which dripped the drool.

"That was a great plan, Juve!" Pete shouted at the First Investigator, who hadn't moved from the spot the whole time. "And now what?"

Jupiter looked at the dog, which was now so furious that his eyeballs had turned backwards. The frightening animal now tried to bite open the door.

Then Jupiter noticed in horror that Bob was still standing in the entrance of Wilcox's house. As soon as he moved, the dog would notice him and pounce on him!

Bob gestured wildly, but Jupiter had no idea what to do. Bob decided to flee to the car. The dog was on the driver's side. If Bob made it to the passenger door before Zero spotted him...

He sprinted off. The dog immediately let go of the door and raced towards Bob.

Bob froze. He was lost.

With bared teeth and insane barking, the dog pounced on Bob.

12. A Serious Word

“Zero!” someone suddenly shouted across the street. “Zero! Here, Zero! Come here now!”

The dog stopped right in front of Bob, growled and drooled and fought with his urge to eat Bob, although his master had ordered him to do the opposite. Finally, he turned around frustrated.

Joe Wilcox stood behind Pete’s car and stared at Bob in rage as his dog obediently trotted to him.

“How dare you!” he lorded it over Bob. “You let my dog loose!”

“I didn’t do anything!” Bob defended himself. “Your dog attacked me, you saw that!”

“And why is he out here on the street?”

“I don’t know!”

Now Jupiter also climbed out of the car. Immediately Zero started barking again but a short command from his master silenced him. “Mr Wilcox, we have only just arrived. How could we let your dog out?”

Wilcox came threatening. His face was bright red and his forehead pulsed with a thick vein. “You rascals. I’ll get you out of here. You nearly run me off the road, and then you drive Zero mad!”

“I hate to repeat myself,” said Jupiter as calmly as possible, “but since we passed you only a few minutes ago, you know very well that we have only been here a few seconds. So following your theory, we should have immediately got out of the car, broken into your house and released Zero, all this knowing that you would arrive here any second. Do you really believe that?”

Wilcox was too upset to say anything.

“There you go,” Jupiter continued. “Your dog was already on the road. He attacked us as we got out of the car.”

“Rubbish!” thundered Wilcox. “I don’t let Zero run around outside! You let him go!”

“You know it can’t be, Mr Wilcox,” Jupiter claimed. “Next time. You had better chain this homicidal animal before anyone else gets hurt.”

“You rascals!” yelled Wilcox. “Get out of Ridgelake. You have no business here. Get out!”

“Come, fellas,” Jupiter said. “I have a feeling that this conversation will not take a constructive turn.” He climbed back into the car and Bob followed him.

“Constructive turn?” hissed Pete, who had preferred not to get out at all. “Goodness, Jupiter, what are you talking about?”

“I had to say something,” Jupiter hissed back.

“Plus, you lied to his face, cold as ice!”

“Should I have told him the truth?”

“What about Darren?” Bob asked.

“If he was smart, he’d escape through the open window and get away,” Jupe said. “Now let’s get out of here! Or else Wilcox will really get the idea to take out his rifle or something.”

Pete started the engine and drove away, his eyes fixed on the rear view mirror.

Wilcox was still yelling after them. Pete watched him until he could no longer see the red vein on Wilcox's forehead.

Jupiter's hope came true. While Wilcox and The Three Investigators had been shouting at each other, Darren had climbed out the window unnoticed and fled. They met in front of the town hall and hurried to get back into Cedric's house. Only when the door behind them had fallen into the lock did they breathe a sigh of relief.

"Are you out of your mind?" Jupiter snapped at Darren after they had retired to the guest room for consultation.

"Why? You told me to find out about Cassandra."

"I asked you to interview some people in the village!"

"I wanted to! But then I saw Wilcox driving away and thought... this is the opportunity! And the people in the village wouldn't have told me anything anyway. What else could I have said to them? Where could I have learned more about Cassandra than where she lived for decades?"

"Wilcox almost got us!" Jupe said.

"It was only because of his bloodthirsty mutt," Darren said. "If it wasn't for him—"

"Guys!" Bob intervened. "Calm down! Darren, you were very reckless, but there's nothing you can do about it now. It just worked out for the best."

"The only victim is my jeans," Pete said and pointed to the tear in his trouser leg. "But it was almost ruined anyway."

Jupiter swallowed the nasty remark on his tongue and instead said: "I hope your daring venture was at least worth it, Darren."

"You bet." Darren grinned all over his face. "You'll be amazed!"

"Well, I'm curious about that," Jupe said.

"There is not much could be learned about Cassandra's life. There was hardly any of her personal effects in Wilcox's apartment. All thrown away, perhaps, or she had very little. But I found some papers in Wilcox's office."

"What papers?" Jupiter wanted to know.

"Financial stuff. Most of it, of course, concerns the Rainbow Pub. Joe Wilcox is amazingly neat when it comes to his financial records, you wouldn't put it past him, would you?"

"I'm amazed that you know so much about it," Pete said.

"My father does accounting for other people," Darren explained. "At home, there's all this paperwork flying around. Anyway, I found a file folder on Cassandra. There wasn't much in it, but there were some old bank books—very old bankbooks, actually, before the dam construction. And look—Cassandra was rich! When her parents died, she inherited almost two hundred thousand dollars. The family used to own a lot of land."

"That was a huge fortune in those days," Bob marvelled.

"It's still a huge fortune if you ask me," Pete said. "No wonder Joe Wilcox wanted to marry her."

"Yes," Darren said impatiently. "But then the money disappeared."

"What do you mean?"

"Shortly before the move to the new Ridgelake, all the assets were withdrawn in cash in a single day, from a bank in Medford... by Cassandra, because it was her personal account."

"Maybe they needed the money for the new house," Pete surmised.

Jupiter shook his head. "They had received a large amount for the resettlement back then. Was there any way you could find out what she did with the money, Darren? A large purchase, perhaps?"

“Nothing. At least nothing I could find in the records. The money just disappeared.”

“Maybe that’s what Dr Holloway meant,” Bob thought of it. “She told us that Cassandra had cheated on Joe, and it was about money. Maybe Joe married Cassandra just for the money, and then she blew it.”

Jupiter shook his head. “I’m sure she didn’t blow it. She did something with it that Joe didn’t like. Anyway, after that, he lost all respect for her and became the tyrant Dr Holloway described him as.”

Bob looked around. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“The silver box!” cried Darren. “She put the money in the box and hid it!”

“The money or something she bought with the money,” Pete surmised. “Gems, perhaps. It must have been very small. And the two divers want it now. That’s why they should watch out for Joe.”

“At the bottom of the lake, therefore, lies a silver box with precious stones worth two hundred thousand dollars!” Darren was thrilled. “When do we dive?”

“Slowly, slowly!” Jupiter said appeasingly. “These are all just suppositions! It may sound logical, but we forget an important point. Why should Cassandra have sunk her fortune? It makes no sense!”

“Hmm...” Darren thought. “So her husband doesn’t spend it.”

“But it was her account...” Jupe said.

“Maybe he wanted to force her to give him the money,” Pete said. “So she made it disappear. It’s possible.”

“Yes, it’s possible,” said Jupiter. “We have no evidence. Nevertheless, I agree with you on one thing, Darren.”

“Yes?” Darren asked hopefully. “Which one?”

“That the next question we have to answer can only be this one: When do we dive?”

Before anyone could say anything, they heard the doorbell downstairs. Darren went out and listened down the stairwell. He heard his great-uncle open the door.

“Cedric,” Joe Wilcox thumped, loud enough for Darren and The Three Investigators to understand every word. “I must have a serious word with you!”

“What’s the matter, Joe?”

“Your grandnephew! The boy has been keeping very bad company! Do you know what those insolent, Californian greenhorns that are visiting you now did?”

“Why don’t you come in,” said Mr Duff.

Rumbling steps echoed through the house, then the voices of the two men were muffled by a door and could no longer be heard.

“Oh, damn,” mumbled Darren. “We’re in trouble.”

“You think so?” Pete asked.

“Definitely. My great-uncle’s not a bad guy, but, you know... if Joe complains to him, I get a sermon, that’s for sure. He might even throw you out. You know what, guys? Let’s just get out of here.”

The Three Investigators immediately agreed. In no time at all, they packed up everything they needed and then sneaked down the stairs, past the door of the study behind which Joe Wilcox was still vociferously talking about the youth of today. Like criminals, they slipped out the back door and took flight.

13. Darren Quits

They spent the rest of the afternoon in Pete's MG. The sun was already low in the sky when The Three Investigators and Darren finally got out of the car, took the equipment out of the boot and distributed it to all of them.

They had driven out of Ridgelake to avoid being seen by the villagers with wetsuits and scuba tanks in the car. The clouds were hanging so low in the sky that they compressed the view of the mountains into a wide panorama.

"Who's diving without a suit?" Darren asked as they headed over the hills. "You, Pete?"

"Nobody," Pete replied irritated. "This is a mountain lake, it's much too cold without a suit! I know what I'm talking about. I've been in it."

"But there are only two suits," Darren remarked.

"We only need two—for Bob and me."

"But you have four oxygen bottles..."

"These are scuba tanks with compressed air, not oxygen bottles," Jupiter explained. "We need one for each diver and the remaining two as spares in case we need to go again. After all, we have nowhere to have them refilled."

Darren seemed to be upset. "But... but does that mean... I'm not diving with you?"

"Uh... well..." Bob said uneasily when no one dared answer. "Basically, that means yes."

"But I want to dive!" cried Darren.

"Do you even have a diving licence?" Jupiter asked.

"Diving licence?" Darren repeated. "But nobody checks up on those around here."

"It's not about someone checking," Jupiter said. "It's about the fact that you can't just jump in the water with a regulator if you don't know what you're doing."

"It can't be that difficult!" protested Darren. "It's like swimming, but underwater."

"It's not really like swimming at all," Pete objected.

"Can you drive?" Jupiter asked.

Darren shook his head in confusion. "No, of course not, I'm only fourteen."

"In other words, you don't have a driver's licence yet. You see. You wouldn't think of getting behind the wheel of a car if you hadn't learned how. It's the same with diving."

"But what's the problem? Diving is easy!"

"That's not it," Jupiter said hard.

"I want to go!"

"Darren, you can't go."

"I want to!"

Jupiter sighed deeply. "You're not going, Darren. It's too dangerous. We're in charge here because we're trained divers. If anything happens to you, we're going to be in big trouble."

"What could happen?" Darren yelled at the First Investigator and stopped.

"Darren, calm down," Pete tried to console him.

"I'm not calming down! You're so mean!" Darren went on ranting. "You're always pretending to be great detectives! And you pick on me, I always do everything wrong!"

Darren, don't do this; Darren, don't do that; Darren, you were very reckless; Darren, let's do this instead. I found out some really important stuff all by myself. Besides, who got you this case, anyway? I did, didn't I? You wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for me!"

"That's not fair, Darren," Jupiter said angrily. "You asked us for help, and we drove from California to Oregon to do that... but certainly not to let you walk all over us. You wanted us to handle the case, so that's what we are doing now."

"But I want in!" cried Darren.

"You've already taken part!" Jupiter reminded him. "From the beginning! You were a help to us, I won't deny that, but you also almost messed everything up more than once. This dive is just too dangerous. You need experience for this... and even then it's still dangerous. That's why you're not coming, Darren. End of discussion."

"You're so arrogant, Jupiter!" Darren was beside himself now, and tears of rage had fallen on his eyes. "You pretend you're a great detective, but you're just a big loud-mouth!"

"Whatever you say," Jupe said. "Can we move on now?"

Darren stared at him in rage, then threw two pairs of fins and a scuba tank to the ground, screaming: "Why don't you do your own dirty work!" He took long strides in the opposite direction. No one wanted to stop him.

"Oh, boy," Pete moaned. "Now what?"

"Nothing," grumbled Jupiter. "We continue as planned. We don't need Darren for the dive."

He picked up the things Darren had dropped and distributed them to everyone. Silently, they continued on their way until they reached the edge of the lake.

In the middle of the mirror-smooth water surface, the weathercock of Sacred Heart stuck out.

"Look, a severed non-human head," Pete said, but no one laughed.

Behind some boulders, Pete and Bob stripped down to their underpants and immediately slipped into their warm wetsuits. By the time they were finally equipped with weight belts, buoyancy compensators, scuba tanks, diving masks, lights and fins, twilight had set in.

"What if we run into Joan and Carl?" Pete asked.

"I don't think there is any danger," said Jupiter. "These two know nothing of Mr Brooks's accident. They still think old Paul roams around here during the day, so they don't dare come in here in daylight."

Pete looked up into the sky that was rapidly darkening. "It'll be dark in half an hour."

"All the more reason for you to hurry," Jupe said. "Because of the spire that rises out of the water, I would estimate the depth of the lake at twenty to thirty metres, depending on the height of the valley at which the church was built. The deeper you dive, the faster your air is used up. So you only have thirty to forty minutes anyway until the scuba tank is empty. But maybe that is enough. You know where to look."

"That doesn't mean we'll have any trouble finding the house," Bob said. "I imagine that orientation won't be easy for us."

"You'll be fine," said Jupiter.

"Let's go!" Pete urged. "We can talk later, I don't want to waste time."

Jupiter put a hand on his friends' shoulders. "Be careful. Always stay together! And don't dive into any buildings carelessly!"

"It's okay, Jupe, it's not the first time we've done this!" Bob reassured him.

"Good luck!"

Together Pete and Bob got into the water. It was not easy with the fins on the stony ground. But as soon as they were deep enough, they switched to swimming. With the air-

filled vests and fins, it was easy. Pete and Bob put on their diving masks and started using snorkels to save air in the scuba tanks. Once their faces were underwater, a new world opened up to them.

The water of the reservoir was amazingly clear, and despite the fading daylight they could see deeper than they had expected. Below them, the bottom of the lake fell steeply. Bushes, shrubs and small trees grew towards the surface. They had been dead for decades, but new life had settled on their skeletons over time. The dead branches were covered with algae and small shells and looked like bizarre coral imitations. At the same time, however, they had retained so much of their original appearance that Bob and Pete were almost expecting to see birds or insects flying among the bushes. Instead, a small school of silver fish scurried through their field of vision here and there.

As the lake deepened, the plants below them disappeared into the darkness. For a while, they swam across a blue, contourless void. Then the first houses appeared. In the dim light and from a distance, they were little more than black outlines. Nevertheless, Bob and Peter were left speechless. It was a bizarre sight. From a distance, old Ridgelake looked as if it had been abandoned only yesterday. All walls and roofs were intact. Even the streets and gardens were still vaguely recognizable as algae-overgrown outlines. They felt as if they were slowly flying over the village.

Then the Church of Sacred Heart came into view. Pete and Bob were heading for the old wooden church. As the spire reached up to the water surface, it was still clearly visible in the fading daylight. The wood shimmered in an unreal, slippery green of algae. A large, almost arm-length fish slowly swam in and out of one of the small spire windows.

Bob turned on his lamp. As soon as the cone of light hit the fish, it took off with three or four hectic strokes of its fins. The light made the algae growth glow even more. When they were very close, they saw the water plants waving lazily back and forth on the wooden wall, almost as if Sacred Heart had gradually come alive during its underwater existence.

When they reached the rusted weathercock, Bob and Pete got their heads out of the water and spit out their snorkels.

"Okay, here we are," Pete said. "Do you know where we have to go?"

"We're on the south side of the spire now," Bob said.

"The best way is to dive down the west side, then we should come directly to the church yard. Cassandra's house was the second on the right. Let's hurry while we still have some light. Hope the lamps can stand the depth."

"We asked specially in the store," Pete said. "Up to fifty metres, we are on the safe side... and we can't go that deep anyway."

Bob nodded calmly. "Okay, final check." They tested their air pressure. Both scuba tanks were filled to the brim with 220 bar. Bob looked back at the shore and signalled that everything was okay and that they were about to dive. The shore line was barely visible and Jupiter himself was not visible. But Bob assumed that the First Investigator was watching them with binoculars. He turned back to Pete. "All right?"

"All right."

"Good. Here we go!"

They pressed the diving masks firmly to their faces once more, put the regulator in their mouths and let the air out of their vests. Immediately the weight belts pulled them down. Then the water sloshed over their heads, and they went down into the depths.

14. The Sunken Village

The first breath out of the scuba tank was always a little overcoming for Bob. It was the moment when he entrusted his life to a piece of plastic in his mouth, a hose and a scuba tank on his back, and that made him nervous every time. But the air flowed easily into his lungs. It made a somewhat eerie Darth Vader noise, but by the time he exhaled and the air bubbled up past his diving mask, he was already used to it.

Bob let the lead weights on his hips slowly pull him down. After three metres, he felt the water pressure in his ears and equalized the pressure. That was what he was doing for the next two minutes the lower he sank. He made eye contact with Pete. The Second Investigator was also busy equalizing the pressure, his hand on his nose and his head tilting back and forth.

When Bob looked at his depth gauge for the first time, he already needed his lamp. They were already fifteen metres deep and had reached the nave without realizing it. Bob touched the slate roof of the church with his fins and for a moment danced on it almost weightlessly.

Pete gave Bob a signal to go further down. They glided over the roof and along its edge further into the depth. The nave was not made of wood, but of solid stone, but even that had taken on a greenish colour over time. A sudden cold crept unpleasantly icy through the protective neoprene skin.

At twenty-one metres, they reached the bottom. The dive computer dangling by Bob's side showed him the time they could stay under water at that depth without risking decompression sickness—forty-one minutes. That wasn't exactly an eternity, but the air supply would sooner or later put an end to their search anyway.

Bob swung the diving lamp over the church yard. All colour had disappeared from the surrounding area. They moved in a world of shades of grey that immediately fused back into an impenetrable black as soon as they had escaped the light cone of the lamp. Now Bob understood why Carl and Joan had resorted to the spotlight. With the flashlights, their field of vision was extremely limited. Suddenly, finding Cassandra's house was no longer easy at all.

Bob and Pete glided two metres over the bottom of the lake with calm fin strokes and tried to catch as much of their surroundings as possible with the flashlights. What had appeared to be clear from above with a residual amount of daylight had turned into a confusing confusion of light and shadow. But finally both agreed to have found the right building.

Cassandra's house was remarkably well-preserved. The cold fresh water had done little damage to the wood. The light blue colour of the wooden planks was better preserved than on the façades of the new Ridgelake. For a moment, Bob was even under the illusion that Cassandra could step out of the front door at any moment. Then a school of blue-grey fish swam through the cone of light and destroyed the illusion.

Pete and Bob dived towards the building. They spotted a broken window upstairs. Many years ago, a stone must have flown through it. Even the sharp-edged remains of the pane were still hanging in the frame. Pete carefully pushed the splinters out with his elbow and watched them sink down like falling leaves. Then the way into the interior of the house was free.

Bob signalled to Pete—from now on, they had to concentrate extremely hard! They were not allowed to lose their bearings in the house and had to be careful not to get caught with their hoses.

Although they floated practically free, every single room seemed frighteningly cramped to them. The walls seemed to crawl towards them. Fortunately, the house was almost completely empty. There was no furniture in the way. Only the fabric wallpaper, which wafted along the walls in partially detached strips like curtains, gave a hint that people had actually lived here once.

Slowly they swam from room to room. Most doors were open. When the doors were closed, the wood had soaked up so much that the doors were stuck, but they managed to open them with one push each time, even if it sometimes took a long time. So they examined the entire upper floor without finding anything, and then dived to the ground floor. Here the search began all over again. But again it was inconclusive.

Bob was about to turn to the last door when Pete tapped him on the shoulder. He turned around. Pete pointed to his dive computer, then he clenched his fist to his chest. That was the sign that he was slowly running out of air. Bob took a look at his own pressure gauge. He still had 80 bar in the scuba tank, Pete less than half of that, his needle was already in the red zone.

They already knew the phenomenon—Pete used much more air than Bob because of his size. He couldn't compensate for this by being more athletic than Bob. If Pete didn't want to take a risk, he had to go up now, because he needed a few more minutes for the way back. A too fast ascent was dangerous for the body.

By sign language, they agreed that Pete should return to the surface. Bob wanted to stay here a few more minutes. They both knew it was reckless to separate. On the other hand, everything had gone smoothly so far. And Bob wanted to have a look around everywhere at least once, even if he hardly believed he would find anything. What could happen?

Pete returned to the upper floor and left the house through the broken window. Bob turned his attention back to the door. That too was stuck, but Bob managed to kick it open. The space behind was as empty as all the others—almost.

But on one wall stood an old chest of drawers, which Cassandra and Joe probably didn't want to take with them. Curiously, Bob swam towards it and tried to open the three wide wooden drawers under the marble top, but they had warped like everything else. Bob braced himself against them with his fins and pulled with all his might. The bottom drawer slipped out. It was empty. The other two were easier to open now. But again, Bob found nothing. He sighed. It reminded him to take a look at his pressure gauge. He, too, should slowly return. He was also getting cold.

Bob turned around and swam back frustrated. On his way up the stairs he accidentally rammed the ceiling with his scuba tank. He slowly became careless and forced himself to concentrate. As soon as he left the house, he could relax, not before!

In the upper corridor he let the lamp wander to the left and right. For a short moment, he thought he had lost his orientation. But he forced himself to rest, remembered where he had come from and swam back the same way. At last the broken window lay before him, and a few seconds later, Bob had left Cassandra's house.

Bob was moving straight towards the church to emerge along its spire when suddenly a bright yellow light flashed up and the sunken Ridgelake was bathed in brightness.

Jupiter noticed the boat with the two divers much too late. He had been busy for the last half an hour with his binoculars, following the barely visible reflection of Bob's and Pete's diving lamps and imagining what strange, mysterious world the two of them had just discovered down there. He had completely forgotten the lake shore. Then suddenly the rowing boat had appeared. It had already covered half the way to the top of the church spire.

Jupe thought feverishly about what to do. But even if he'd noticed the boat right away, there was nothing he could do. Bob and Pete were out there on their own. He couldn't come to their aid or make contact with them in any way. Jupiter had to resort to wait and see.

The boat stopped near the weathercock. A few seconds later, the lake suddenly shone in bright light. Jupiter held his breath and tried to see more. But like the first time, the reflections on the water blurred every clear contour. The boat appeared as a shadow but immediately disappeared again, as did the outlines of the church spire and the roofs of the houses under water.

Although he could hardly see anything, Jupiter was at some point certain that the two figures on board had left the boat. If Bob and Pete were still down there...

But then suddenly, the silhouette of a diver appeared. The closer he moved away from the light, the more clearly Jupiter could recognize him. It was Pete who came towards him as fast as he could. But he was alone.

"Pete!" whispered Jupiter, as soon as he thought the Second Investigator was within earshot. "Here, Pete!"

The Second Investigator dragged himself groaning out of the water and freed himself from the heavy scuba tank and the weight belt.

"Where's Bob?" Jupiter pressed him.

"Still down there," Pete gasped exhausted.

"Why didn't you stay together?"

"I had no more air, he did. He only wanted to examine the last room. I was almost back up when the light came on. It was Carl and Joan, but fortunately they didn't see me. I swam around their boat a good distance away. But Bob's still down there! They might see him!"

"How much air does he have left?"

Pete looked at his gauges, calculated how long it had taken him to reach the shore and tried to estimate Bob's air supply. His stomach seized up when he came to the result. "By now... probably none!"

15. Nitrogen Narcosis

When the lights came on, Bob felt like a rabbit caught in headlights. At first, he was frozen and blinked against the unreal light source that tore the lake out of its darkness. Suddenly everything was there—the Church of Sacred Heart, Cassandra’s house, the square, the streets, the whole village—frozen as in a snow globe, preserved by icy mountain water fifty years ago.

Then Bob could finally tear himself away from the sight. With this lighting, he was probably very easy to see from above. If he was discovered, they could forget about searching for Cassandra’s silver box! Bob slapped his fins hard and headed for the church he was closest to.

The windows that once decorated the nave were missing. Presumably they had been removed and placed in the new church. High black holes yawned in their place. Bob didn’t hesitate and swam in like a prey fish into its hole. He turned off the lamp and turned to the window.

It did not last ten seconds, when two divers appeared in his field of vision—Carl and Joan. Bob wanted to wait until they were deep enough so he could escape unnoticed on the other side of the nave. But when he turned around, he saw that there were no windows on the other side. And if he went out the way he came in, the two divers would spot him immediately. He had no choice. He had to wait until they were out of sight.

But that didn’t happen. Carl and Joan swam around the village square, sometimes to this house, sometimes to that one, apparently at odds over which one they had already searched and which one they hadn’t. At no point did Bob dare leave his hiding place.

Suddenly he found it difficult to breathe. In horror, Bob groped for his dive computer. How long had he been here? Three minutes? Four minutes? Too long!

His scuba tank was empty!

Panic instantly seized him with an icy grip. He shook his pressure gauge, knocked against the safety glass, but the red needle did not move a millimetre. In horror, Bob took a deep pull from the mouthpiece. It felt as if he was sucking on an empty bottle of water. There was nothing left!

He had to go up! He needed air! Now!

His lungs started to hurt. The muscles in his chest wanted to stretch and resisted with strength against the order to stay relaxed.

Up! Now! Bob knew that the air still in his lungs would expand as the pressure dropped as he emerged. At this depth, it would expand to three times its volume. Three breaths. That might be enough. It had to be enough.

Bob let all caution go, pushed off and kicked with his fins. Three metres, four metres, the pain didn’t let up, it got worse, and already he saw colourful spots before his eyes when he suddenly pierced the surface of the water.

But something was wrong. Bob knew that immediately... but it made no difference. He had no choice. He spat out the mouthpiece and inhaled as deeply as he could.

The air tasted foul, stank like the plague and burned like alcohol on an open wound... but it was air. Bob gasped and gasped and wouldn’t stop panting. Somehow, he was experiencing

shortness of breath. Then he realized that he wasn't on the surface of the lake! He was somewhere else.

Bob groped around him, turned, looking for light, but there was none. Just below him, very faintly, something from the boat light came through the three windows.

"Easy, Bob," he murmured and took another deep breath. "Calm down, for goodness' sake!"

Bob groped for the inflation hose of his vest and blew into it until it tightly enclosed his upper body and made him float on the surface like a cork. Now he didn't have to kick his legs anymore, and he was able to relax. Breathing was a little easier for him when he was no longer moving. The feeling that someone was strangling his neck in the middle of a cesspool remained.

After some time, he noticed that the oxygen in the air was scarce but sufficient if he breathed deeply enough. He would not suffocate—at least not immediately.

Bob closed his eyes, drifted calmly in the water for a few moments, listened to his own loudly echoing breath and thought. Then he remembered his lamp and turned it on.

Just above him, there was a grey stone arch—the ceiling of the nave. In his panic, Bob had simply shot up without realizing that he was still in the church. A bubble had formed under its airtight roof. Air that had been trapped here for decades and had nowhere to escape. It was only a little more than half a metre up to the ceiling. When Bob put his hand over his head, he could touch the cold stone. It felt like an icy, tiny prison where no breathing creature could survive for long.

Bob cursed his recklessness. Why hadn't he returned with Pete? Why had he been so stupid to hide when Carl and Joan appeared? If they had discovered him, so what? He had risked his life for a silver box that he didn't even know what was inside! And now, he was trapped.

He was thinking. He had to get out of here somehow. Take a deep breath and then back through the church window and up? It was a big risk. Oxygen deprivation aside, he'd been down far too long to risk surfacing that quickly. Pete might have come to his aid, but how long would it take?

And how would the Second Investigator find him? That leaves Carl and Joan. He had to try to get their attention so he could use their alternate air supply. Bob didn't believe they would let a diver die in distress just to protect their secret.

Bob directed the beam of his lamp downwards. He hoped that the two divers from outside would see the light through the church window.

For minutes, Bob swung the lamp back and forth. He gave an SOS signal. But nothing happened. Maybe Joan and Carl were already gone... or the light was not visible at all because of the spotlight shining over it.

Bob gathered all his courage. He put his diving mask back on, took as deep a breath as possible and deflated his vest. Immediately, he sank back into the depths. Bob lowered himself until he was at window level. He looked out. There was still light outside, but there was really no sign of Joan and Carl.

Bob's eyes fell on the organ. It stood at the other end of the nave, slightly elevated on a wooden pedestal. Above the organ console, the silver pipes groped their way into the cold mountain lake water. He remembered having read in one of the parish newsletters that the old church organ had been left behind and that a new organ had been commissioned for the new Ridgelake church. He couldn't remember the reason for this, but even the stool had been left behind.

It was Cassandra's stool! She had sat and played here.

Bob swam back into the air bubble and inflated his vest again so that he could float. Still, he was dizzy even though the vest supported him. And suddenly, Bob thought he heard something—noises... human voices... which, of course, was impossible underwater.

But there was no doubt—there was someone there! Under him! Bob squeezed his diving mask tightly, took the snorkel in his mouth and looked down.

Candles were burning in the church... and there were people. They came in slowly through the big wooden entrance gate and sat down on the benches one after the other. It did not seem to be an ordinary service. Everyone wore black. Was it a funeral? Everyone took their seats, shuffling and clearing their throat.

Then the priest came through the central aisle and walked the two steps up to the altar.

Bob wondered why nobody noticed him. He was hovering under the ceiling directly over the heads of the worshippers. Sooner or later, someone had to look up. This in turn led to the question of how all this was even possible. He was under water in a city that had gone under many decades ago!

But before Bob could look for an answer, Cassandra Wilcox started playing the organ. The first few chords made him shiver... and then the powerful, beautiful music captured him completely.

When Pete dived the second time, he did not care if Carl and Joan could see him or not. His heart was beating in his chest. Bob hadn't come up again. After Pete had changed to the spare scuba tank as fast as he could and jumped back into the water, and swam to the middle of the lake, desperately looking for Bob. But there was no trace of his friend.

Pete clung to the last spark of hope in him. Maybe Bob's scuba tank had been fuller than he thought... maybe the reading had been erroneous... maybe he had turned up, changed direction and swum to the wrong side of the lake.

But the piercing feeling that turned his whole body into ice simply did not disappear. It was the feeling that something terrible had happened to Bob.

As fast as he could, Pete dived into the deep. With all his might, he pushed away the pain in his ears and sank like a stone.

There was no sign of Joan and Carl, no sign of Bob. Pete swam to Cassandra's house and came through the broken window. His scuba tank got stuck. Pete, in a rage, broke free. He knew he was getting careless, but if Bob was really around, he couldn't lose a second! But Bob was not here. Pete searched every room. He was not there.

Pete swam back. Outside, he looked around desperately. He cursed the limited field of vision of his diving mask. He cursed himself that he had used more air than Bob! He cursed this whole case! Where should he look now? Where?

Suddenly, he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. It was a light. It shimmered through one of the church windows. Was it a reflection of the spotlight over his head? No, it looked different.

Pete moved, knowing full well that he might swim straight into Joan or Carl. It was not a reflection. It was a flashlight. It was dangling in the motionless hand of a diver floating under the nave ceiling.

Pete's heart stopped, then it began to race suddenly. He swam through the window and slid up. Then he recognized the face behind the diving mask. It was Bob! And he stared blankly into space and didn't move.

Pete saw that there was an air bubble under the ceiling. He appeared beside Bob and ripped his friend's face out of the water. Bob stared at him with his eyes wide open... and he

made horrible noises.

Then he spat out the snorkel and repeated the noises, but this time it sounded like: “Pete! What are you doing here? Weren’t you supposed to be up there?”

Pete smelled the air. It was awful. He took his alternative air supply from its holder and stuffed it into Bob’s mouth.

“Waf arrgh youff dooinn?” Bob complained.

“Breathe!” Pete insisted.

Bob breathed. So that’s what normal air smelled like. He had almost forgotten. What a relief! The dizziness didn’t go away, though... and what about the service? Had stopped as soon as Pete showed up.

Bob took the regulator out of his mouth. “Did you hear the organ, Pete?”

“Organ? Are you crazy? Bob! You didn’t come up! We thought you’d drowned!”

“I almost did.”

“What... what... what are you thinking?”

“There was no other way!” Bob defended himself and tried to explain the situation. But somehow he couldn’t.

He still had the organ playing in his head. Had it been Bach? He had the feeling it was Bach, but maybe it just sounded like Bach, and in reality it was someone else, maybe...

“Bob!” Pete tore him out of his thoughts. “Are you okay?”

Bob was thinking. Was he okay? No. “No,” he said.

“Nitrogen!” cried Pete. “You’re suffering from nitrogen narcosis! You’re drunk as a skunk.”

“Yeah, maybe. Now that you mention it...”

“You gotta get out of here, Bob. No problem. We can show up together. There’s plenty of air for both of us.”

“We can’t go up yet.”

“Yes, we can. Bob, you’re not in your right mind. Listen to me. You’re gonna take my alternate air supply, and then we’re gonna dive together and swim through that window, and then we’re gonna surface slowly and by the book, and...”

“But we have to get to the organ first!”

“What? Bob, no, we don’t have to go to the organ. It’s just the nitrogen telling you that!”

“Pete, I know where the box is,” Bob said.

It took Pete a moment for the information to leak to him. “Excuse me?”

“The box is hidden somewhere by the organ. Remember what Dr Holloway said? Cassandra sought refuge in church and music after deceiving Joseph in some way. The organ was her life.”

“You might be right,” said Pete, although he was not at all comfortable spending another second down here than necessary.

Nitrogen narcosis was no longer dangerous and would be gone as soon as Bob was back on the surface. But he had had enough of the diving adventure. On the other hand, it was better to check right now to see if Bob’s hunch was right. That way they would never have to come back down here again.

Pete took a look at his pressure gauge. The scuba tank was still three-quarters full. “All right. I’ll go check, you stay here. I’ll be back in a minute to pick you up. Then we’ll go up.”

Bob nodded.

“And if you hear organ music again—just don’t pay attention to it!” Pete nodded at him encouragingly.

“I still have to find out if it really was Bach,” said Bob.

Pete shook his head and dived.

The organ was at the other end of the nave. The silver organ pipes shimmered unreal in the light of the flashlight. The metal was tarnished and stained, but not a single algae had settled on it. It almost looked as if one only had to strike the keys to elicit sounds from it again after years of silence.

Pete looked around and wondered where to look. The pipes were too narrow for the box, and the organ itself offered no possibility to hide anything. Then his eyes fell on the seat. It was a kind of piano stool, low and wide. The upholstery had half disintegrated. Pete realized that the seat could be folded up to hold musical scripts. The water had affected the stool so much that it was half crumbled when Pete tried to fold the seat up. Something silver shimmered through between rotten wood and softened upholstery material.

With a jerk, Pete tore the seat off completely.

A book-sized silver box decorated with a broad cross reflected the light of his torch like a mirror. Pete carefully lifted it out of its hiding place, clamped it under his arm and returned to Bob.

Bob had watched Pete from the bubble through his diving mask. "You found it, didn't you?" he excitedly shouted. "I saw you going at that stool."

Pete nodded and held the box over the water surface. "I have found it. But we'd better not open it until we're back up, otherwise we might ruin the contents. Come on."

He handed Bob the second regulator, put his own in his mouth. The box was stuck under his arm. Then they held each other by the forearm and dived.

It was not easy to swim through the narrow window in this formation, but finally they had made it and left Sacred Heart at last.

Outside, the lake was still illuminated by artificial spotlights. Additionally, two flashlights shone into their eyes.

Joan and Carl had been waiting for them.

16. Cassandra's Will

Jupiter thought he was going crazy. Again and again he looked at his watch. Thirteen minutes. Pete had been down there for thirteen minutes. It couldn't be good. It could only mean that his friends had slipped into an enormous catastrophe. If Pete had found Bob at once, he would have resurfaced long ago. If he hadn't found him, Bob had been without oxygen for a quarter of an hour. No matter how Jupiter turned it around, he could not come up with a plausible story that did not end in tragedy.

He had to do something. Something... Get help... The police, the fire department! But he knew that a Medford ambulance couldn't be here for an hour at the earliest. It was definitely too late.

Then suddenly the light went out. From one second to the other, the lake sank into darkness again. Jupiter held the binoculars to his eyes and searched the water surface.

The boat, now only a black shadow, started moving again. Who was on board, Jupiter could not recognize. For minutes, he followed the course of the boat spellbound. Then suddenly he heard a splash in the water. Not far from the shore two heads had emerged from the water.

It was Pete and Bob!

Jupiter felt a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. An indescribable relief washed over him. Excited, he started to wave. "Bob! Pete! Over here! Thank goodness! What happened? Are you all right?"

"We're okay," Pete gasped as he dragged himself ashore. "Bob's still a little drunk... and the box is gone."

"You found it?"

"Yes. But Carl and Joan took it from us. We didn't stand a chance. After all, there were two of us hanging on an air supply. Carl could just yank the box from under my arm and swim off. Did you see them? We've got to stop them!"

"They rowed to the shore," Jupiter said and helped the limp Bob to free himself from the heavy equipment.

"Then we must go after them," Pete urged.

"But you might want to—" Jupe began.

"We must go after them," Pete repeated emphatically. "Otherwise the whole action was for nothing! Come on!"

He threw off his fins but still wrapped in his wetsuit, he quickly slipped on his shoes and ran. Jupiter and Bob reluctantly followed him. Bob told Jupe in short words what had happened underwater. He was still a bit confused and shaky on his feet and Jupiter didn't want to leave him alone. That's why they had lost Pete after only half a minute in the darkness.

"Where is he now?" growled Jupiter. "Does he even know where the boat is? What's he going to do when he sees Carl and Joan—"

This is as far as he got. Suddenly, a shot ripped through the night's silence. Jupiter saw the muzzle flash before him in the darkness. Then a dog barked.

Jupiter ran on. It was so dark that he almost ran into Pete. He stood on the riverbank with his hands up and gave a little scream when Jupiter suddenly appeared behind him.

It took a moment for the First Investigator to grasp the situation. Joan and Carl were still standing in their complete diving gear next to their boat, which they had just pulled ashore. Mr Wilcox stood a little higher on the bank... holding a lamp in one hand and his rifle in the other. At his side was Zero, snarling and twitching as if he could hardly contain himself from jumping and tearing someone to pieces.

"Here comes your cheeky friend," Wilcox remarked and shone a light in Jupiter's face. "And the third in the bunch, still out of breath, poor boy. Come here, boy. Come closer. Zero won't hurt you—at least not unless I tell him."

"What are you doing, Mr Wilcox?" Jupiter asked, trying to give his voice a firm and superior tone. "Did you just fire a shot?"

"Oho, you're a brave one! You're not even afraid of my rifle, aren't you?" Wilcox said. "Yes, smart-ass, that was a shot, and a warning shot, because these two characters here thought they could just run away. Well, you thought wrong."

He took a step closer and successively shone a light in the faces of The Three Investigators and Joan and Carl. "And now I want to know what's going on here. I know you from somewhere. We've met before!"

"What are you talking about?" asked Joan venomously.

"I speak of your snooping, dear lady!" Wilcox thundered. "And that of your three loud-mouthed child companions."

"If you mean the three boys, I don't know them at all," Joan replied. "And I don't know what you mean by snooping. My brother and I went diving in this lake. You may know that there's a sunken village in there. This is a great challenge for recreational divers like us."

"In the middle of the night?" Wilcox sneered.

"Of course. That's what makes it a challenge. Now, I'd advise you to put down that rifle and leave us alone, or you risk big trouble with the police."

"Stop talking nonsense," Wilcox yelled. "I've been watching you—with a night-glass. First I followed those three boys there because I suspected they were up to something... and then I spotted you with your boat. I saw you pull something out of the lake."

"Just a little souvenir of a fascinating dive," said Carl.

Wilcox did not let him finish, but approached the boat with three quick steps and took a look inside.

Jupiter immediately realized that Wilcox had not known until that moment what had just found its way to the surface from the depths of the lake. When he saw the silver box, he lost his voice for a moment.

"Where did you get that?" Wilcox whispered finally, and picked the box up as carefully as if it were fragile. He set the lamp aside...

"Get your hands off it, man!" Carl cried angrily, but immediately Wilcox pointed the rifle at him again.

"I said, where did you get this," he yelled. "I want to know!"

"From me," Pete now spoke. "We both found the box, Bob and I. They took it from us. But it's ours."

"Ha!" laughed Wilcox, and Zero let out a bark. "You don't know what you're talking about, boy!"

"You mean because the box actually belonged to your wife Cassandra?" Jupiter asked casually, watching contentedly as Wilcox's features slipped away for the second time. "We know perfectly well what we are talking about. Mr Wilcox."

Joseph Wilcox was not alone in being completely baffled. Carl and Joan also looked stunned at the First Investigator.

“Who are you guys?” asked Joan.

“What do you know about Cassandra?” Wilcox asked.

Jupiter took a step forward. “Put the rifle down, Mr Wilcox, and I will share my knowledge with you... if we are to find out who has a legitimate claim to the contents of this box. We must talk to each other sooner or later anyway... or do you really mean to shoot us one by one? I hardly think so.”

Joe Wilcox hesitated for a few seconds, but then his curiosity apparently won out. He put the rifle over his shoulder and said: “Talk, boy!”

Jupiter took a deep breath. “A few days ago my friends and I were asked by Darren Duff, Cedric Duff’s great-nephew, to investigate a mysterious affair.”

“Investigate?” asked Joe Wilcox, irritated.

Wordlessly Jupiter handed him one of their business cards. It said:



“This is a bad joke,” scoffed Wilcox. “You three want to be investigators? Who would believe it?”

“Whoever believes it, doesn’t matter,” Jupiter replied. “The fact is, we came to Ridgelake and by chance, we saw a mysterious light show up here at the lake.

“We weren’t the only witnesses. Paul Brooks saw the light too. He was so upset by the glowing water that he went into the lake and almost drowned if Pete hadn’t saved him. Over the next few days, we investigated and found out that the mysterious glow came from a very powerful lamp that was mounted under this row boat—the boat of Carl and Joan, who had been diving in the lake for several days, in search of the silver box belonging to Cassandra Wilcox, née Spencer—your late wife.”

Now Wilcox turned his scowl toward Carl and Joan. “Who are you?” he asked grimly.

Joan and Carl looked at each other, uncertain how to react. Eventually, Joan made a move. “My name is Joan Meyers. This is my brother Carl. Our parents died when we were very young. We were sent to an orphanage. But we only spent a few months there until we were adopted by the Meyers and moved to Portland.

“After we graduated from high school, we got a message from the orphanage’s director. He told us that at that time, even before our adoption, a parcel had arrived for us. It was a parcel full of money. There was a short letter. It asked the management of the orphanage to keep the money for us until we were old enough. The letter was unsigned and the parcel had no sender.

“The management of the orphanage complied with the request of the anonymous donor and invested the money for us. We tried to find out who the noble donor was, but we couldn’t find out then.”

“Until we received a letter a few weeks ago,” Carl continued. “Again the orphanage had forwarded it to us, again there was no sender. The letter said that a woman called Cassandra Wilcox had hidden something for us at the bottom of the reservoir—a silver box. It was meant for us, but if we were to look for it we should beware of a certain Joseph. Also enclosed was a photograph showing Cassandra and the box.”

“Pardon?” cried Wilcox. “That’s nonsense. My wife died three months ago. She had cancer. She certainly didn’t go down to the bottom of the lake and hide anything there.”

Jupiter shook his head slowly. “Your wife hid the box there fifty years ago—before the village was flooded.”

“Back then? But...” Joseph Wilcox fell silent, suddenly trapped in memories that were half a century old.

“Your wife received the box as a young woman from the congregation, remember? You haven’t seen it since, have you? And now you probably suspect Cassandra has hidden the money she inherited from her parents in the box...”

While Jupiter was still talking, he began to realize something. “That was my suspicion for a long time... but I no longer believe it. Tell me, Joan, how much money did the unknown donor leave for you? Was it about two hundred thousand dollars? Well, it could have been an unknown donor.” Jupiter let his words work.

Joseph Wilcox stared alternately at Joan and Carl and became increasingly pale. Suddenly, he even began to tremble. He jammed the lamp under his arm and began to tamper with the box. The shutter mechanism worked perfectly. Cold mountain water was running out when Wilcox opened the lid. He shone a light into it, but he held the box so that no one else could see inside.

Wilcox looked at the contents for a moment. Then he closed the lid of the box again and clasped it like a dangerous weapon that no one else was allowed to get hold of.

“You all better go home now,” he said soundlessly. “And don’t you ever come back here!”

“What’s in the box?” asked Carl in a hard voice.

“It’s none of your business.” Without another word, Joseph Wilcox turned and took a few steps in the dark. Jupiter was already afraid he would really disappear forever, leaving them all without an explanation.

But suddenly a shadow appeared behind a dense hedge of blackberries and stood in the way of Wilcox. Zero began to growl, but then the dog caught the scent and wagged his tail towards the figure that had appeared out of nowhere.

“Yes, Joe, it does,” the man said. “It’s their business.”

“Cedric!” Wilcox cried in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

Darren Duff’s great-uncle came closer. Behind him, another figure emerged from the shadows. It was Darren.

“Darren brought me here,” Cedric explained.

Darren ran up to The Three Investigators. Uncertain, almost afraid, he looked from one to the other, but did not dare to say anything.

“After you complained to me about Darren and his friends, Joe. He didn’t want to talk at first, but then he told me who they really are and what they’ve been up to these past few days in Ridgelake. I realized something.”

“You realized something?” repeated Joe incredulously. “What did you realize, Cedric? Did you have anything to do with this?”

Cedric nodded slowly. He stood so close to them now that Jupiter could see the sad expression on his face. “Cassandra has confided in me.”

“Confided? What do you mean?” Wilcox asked.

“Before she died, she asked me to do something. I was to contact Joan and Carl and tell them about the silver box hidden at the bottom of the lake.”

“What... but how... do you know what’s in here?”

Cedric shook his head. “I have an idea, but in the end, it doesn’t matter. She wanted Joan and Carl to have the box. It was her last will and testament... and I wasn’t going to deny her that. She was already too weak to take matters into her own hands. So I helped her and wrote the letter to the orphanage.”

“You?” Joe asked soundlessly. “But why didn’t she—”

“She was afraid of you, Joe!” Cedric said forcefully. “She’s been afraid of you all her life! She didn’t dare to tell you about the box because she believed that you never granted her that wish. She even asked me to warn Joan and Carl about you.”

For a brief moment, Jupiter feared that Wilcox’s anger would flare up again and he would go after Cedric Duff.

But then Joe Wilcox let his shoulders droop and lowered his eyes. For seconds, he stared at the ground and shook his head slowly. “That box contains the truth,” he muttered almost inaudibly.

“And Cassandra wanted Joan and Carl to know about it,” Cedric said. “Grant her that wish, Joe. Please.”

Joe Wilcox never moved—for minutes, it seemed to Jupiter. But then he slowly stepped towards the two divers and handed Joan the silver box. He turned and walked slowly back towards Ridgelake. He only gave Cedric a long look before he and his dog disappeared into the darkness.

The Three Investigators looked at each other somewhat confused.

“Have I ruined everything now?” Darren whispered fearfully to them.

“No, Darren,” Jupiter reassured him. “You haven’t ruined anything. You were right to tell your great-uncle everything.”

Little by little, everyone looked over to Joan, who, somewhat perplexed, was weighing the box in her hands. “I don’t understand half of what’s going on here,” she finally admitted. “But I think that I can trust you all.”

Then she let the locking mechanism snap open and lifted the lid.

There was no money in Cassandra’s silver box. No gems either. But a diary carefully wrapped in a waterproof foil.

17. The Secret of Ridgelake

3 July

It is absurd. The dam is so far only an idea—a construction plan, a technical drawing. Nobody knows if it will really be built. And yet it seems more threatening than any real danger. For long weeks and months, I believed that I was afraid of having to leave my home.

My childhood home, my street, the beloved bubbling river just behind the meadow. If they build the dam, the river won't exist anymore. It'll swell up until it covers the whole valley, until it becomes a lake miles long.

But I'm beginning to understand that this is not the reason for my fear. A new Ridgelake would be built, it would be right next door, over the hills. We'd have new houses and money for a new life. It would be better than before. No, that's not what I'm afraid of.

What keeps me awake at night is what I see in people's faces. The reservoir is already gnawing at the village, even though the dam hasn't been built yet. The water is beginning to undermine the village community.

A year ago, we decided that only a unanimous decision would apply with regard to the dam project. But one person is still against it and does not want to leave his home despite the money the construction company is willing to pay—Charlie.

He wants to stay with his children in the house where his wife died a year ago. I can understand him. He believes the memory of her will be washed away by the water of the river. He's nowhere near ready. Everyone seems to think Charlie will change his mind. That he's just playing poker to make more money. But you only have to look him in the eye to see the truth—Charlie's not going.

25 July

The decision will be made the day after tomorrow, one way or another. In eight-forty hours, I know, we'll all know whether or not the dam will be there. That decision is ours—Ridgelake's, nobody else's. We've been telling ourselves that for months. But now we know that's not true. It's Charlie's decision. Charlie, who won't listen to reason. That's what Joseph says, what Daniel says, what almost everyone says. They know he won't be bought off. They'll try again with arguments. But if that doesn't help...

I'm scared. Real fear this time. Joseph left the house late last night. He said he was going out for a beer, but I saw out the window that Richard's pub was already closed. Joseph was not in the pub. He was meeting up with the others—Daniel, Thelonius, Cedric, Jack, Bradley, Paul and Steven. They're up to something.

Joseph came back drunk. He doesn't usually drink much. I think he drank himself courageously. Courage to do something that could lead us all to our doom.

I pray that I'm wrong. I pray that I have the strength to stop him if I'm not wrong.

27 July at dawn

I don't know where to start. How to put the horror of that night into words. The unimaginable has happened.

Outside, the last flames are still flickering, thick soot is in the air, the valley is filled with the stinking smoke of the fire that has turned Charlie's house to ashes.

I woke up at midnight from the cries and shouts outside the door. Then I saw the reflection of the fire in the night clouds. I looked out the window. Up on the hillside, Charlie's house was on fire. It burned so brightly that I knew immediately that any help would come too late.

Joseph came back—so white in the face and so distraught, as I've never seen my husband before. I asked him what had happened. Charlie's house, he said, was on fire, completely toneless.

'My goodness,' I called. 'What about Charlie, what about the children?'

'The children are safe,' he whispered. 'But Charlie thought they were in the house. He ran inside, terrified. He never came out. Then the roof collapsed.'

Afterwards Joseph was silent. He never looked me in the eye. He didn't answer my questions. He lay down in bed, stared at the ceiling and kept quiet.

I'm afraid of him now too.

29 July

I move in a whispered nightmare made of cotton wool and quiet steps. No one speaks at normal volume. Each man whispers as if he's afraid of waking the dead.

Charlie is dead. He burned to death in his house. His children were with Sarah. Daniel's wife won't tell me why they were with her. Nobody wants to say anything.

Joseph did not speak all day yesterday. He didn't get out of bed. My fear turned to anger. Tonight I listened for his breath. He did not sleep. So I asked him what happened.

'An accident,' he said. 'It was an accident, honey. It's nobody's fault.'

The assembly is postponed to next week when Charlie is buried.

3 August

Today was Charlie's funeral. The whole village was there. But nobody spoke. No one found words. Reverend Marten read from the Bible. Afterwards everyone dispersed very quickly. No one stopped to see Richard.

No one spoke. Ridgelake is sinking into silence. I saw Sarah and Daniel drive away in their car at noon. They had the twins with them. They returned an hour ago without the children.

'The twins are now in an orphanage,' Joseph said when I asked him. Apparently, he knew about it.

No one in Ridgelake would take the kids. Would I have wanted to? Maybe. But not Joseph. And I don't know if I would have. The truth, which is so hard to think, even harder to write and impossible to say. I'm as guilty as anybody else. I knew something would happen. But I didn't do anything.

6 August

Today was the last Assembly. The decision was unanimous—the dam is to be built. Construction work will start as early as next week. A year from now, Ridgelake will be history.

12 February

It's been too long since I wrote anything. Too long I hid myself in silence. I have spent endless hours in church playing the organ these past months. I thought it would cure me, but the music only numbs me. When I read the entries from last summer earlier, I felt sick. I thought I had at least been honest with myself and this diary. But I wasn't. My report was vague, and I didn't really mention anything by name. But I have to call a spade a spade. I have to. As long as I can distinguish truth from silence.

The truth:

All of Ridgelake wanted the dam. All of Ridgelake wanted the money, the new houses, the new village, the new life. All except Charlie. He wouldn't be talked into it. So Daniel, Thelonius, Cedric, Jack, Bradley, Paul and Steven decided to do something. They and Joseph, my husband.

They were going to take Charlie out for a beer and set fire to his house behind his back. Sarah was supposed to take care of the children. No one was supposed to get hurt. It was a cruel plan, but nobody seemed to think it was. Charlie had to be brought to his senses. Without a house, he would have had no reason to vote against the dam. He would have agreed. He would have appreciated the new house and all the money, and forgiven the others their actions. He would have understood that it was better that way. For everyone.

But the plan did not work out. Charlie argued with the others and went to the toilet. But he was so angry that he didn't come back. Instead, he ran out Richard's pub through the back door and went home.

He came just in time to see his house go up in flames. Charlie thought that his children were still in the house. He rushed in to save them and died in the flames.

When the others in Richard's pub noticed that Charlie did not return, it was already too late.

Everyone knew about the plan. Not everyone was involved in its implementation, but all of Ridgelake had heard the whispers. Everyone, really everyone, knew that Daniel and Joseph and the others were up to something. No one stood against them. Nobody did anything. Not even I. All I did was pray. But by then, Ridgelake had become a wretched place. Only no one had noticed.

I am guilty. We all are. And we all know each other's guilt. No one talks about it. No one accuses the other. No one wants to repent. No one talks about Charlie or the twins. And if they do, they would subtly say that it was a tragic accident.

Slowly the lie begins to cover up the truth. The villagers are counting the days until the new Ridgelake is finally ready. Until the old Ridgelake is flooded, until the water finally buries the last bad memories. No one realizes that the blame will stay. The poison works slowly... but it works.

7 March

I can't live like this. I had to do something. I know I can't make anything right. But maybe I can do something better.

I secretly drove to Medford and went to the bank. I withdrew all the money I inherited from my parents. I packed it carefully and sent it to the orphanage. It's intended for Charlie's twins. I want them to have it when they're old enough. They should never know who sent it to them. The best thing will be if they never hear the name Ridgelake and never have to know their story. They're so young, they won't remember anything. May the twins receive many happy blessings in their life.

23 March

Joseph found out the money's missing. He's angry, as angry as I've ever seen him.

I can't tell him where the money is. He wouldn't understand. He'd say not to go on about this old story all the time. He would force me to get the money back from the orphanage. So I keep quiet. He won't know what I used the money for. I'll lock myself up in my silence, like he has since last summer. Joseph won't get a word out of me.

Thank goodness Cedric's here. I think he's keeping Joseph from hurting me. But I'll be strong, I promised myself. I must see to it myself that Carl and Joan get that money when they're old enough, and no one else.

26 March

Since my last entry, I can't help thinking that Joseph might discover this diary. It was foolish of me to write everything down. I was thinking about burning it, but this book probably contains the only records of the truth. I don't want to destroy it. It's silly, I know, because it's just a diary, and no one will ever read it but me. But I can't bring myself to erase the truth even on paper, after it's already disappeared in people's minds. From now on I will hide the book in the church, not at home. I can lock the lid of the stool. No one has the key but me.

27 May

It's time. The work on the dam was completed in record time. The new Ridgelake is fully constructed. We're moving.

In four days, the river's water will rise slowly. In a week, all of Ridgelake will be in water. In two months, only the spire will rise out of the water. And a year from now, nothing will remind you of the old Ridgelake. And the crime will have been washed away for good. And I too will try to start a new life. I know I won't succeed. No one will. Not even those who leave, and there are many of them. We'll take Charlie with us wherever we flee, and however much water our past may cover. But we will all try every day anew.

I will leave my diary here. I like to think that the only piece of truth that exists about Charlie's fate is where all of Ridgelake is trying to bury its bad dreams. Who knows, maybe someday someone will read it after all. Many, many years from now, when we have all turned to dust. Then perhaps someone will be able to forgive me.

18. Farewell to Ridgelake

The Three Investigators, Darren, his uncle Cedric, Joan and Carl sat together in the study of the town hall and listened to the crackling of the fire in the fireplace. Joan, who had been reading from Cassandra's diary in a quiet voice for the last half hour, closed it quietly.

For a long time nobody spoke a word. Jupiter, Pete and Bob didn't even dare look over at Joan and Carl.

Finally, Carl broke the silence. "What happened to the others?" he asked Cedric Duff.

The voice of Darren's great-uncle failed when he started to answer. He had to clear his throat. "Most are dead. Thelonius died of pneumonia 30 years ago. Steven was next, he was in a car accident. Jack and Bradley died in quick succession a few years ago. They were just old. All three never married.

"Daniel is still alive, he runs the small grocery store in the village. But his wife Sarah, the woman who took the twins... you two..." Cedric's voice failed again. He swallowed hard. "Fifteen years ago, Sarah fell off a ladder and broke her neck.

"Paul was the man who jumped into the lake three days ago. He's a little better, Dr Holloway says. I was with him today. He was the only one of us who's been to the lake every single day of his life since then. That's where he spoke to Charlie... to your father. He still believes it was Charlie's soul he saw in the water. And that Charlie's spirit has come to get him. I think Paul is waiting to finally follow him." Cedric was silent.

Now Jupiter dared to take a look at Joan and Carl.

Joan nodded silently. She looked thoughtful. There was no telling what was going on inside her. Carl was even more withdrawn... but in his eyes he saw neither anger nor bitterness.

"It's a sad story," Joan finally said softly. "So many deaths and so little new life."

"Ridgelake died when Charlie perished in the flames," Cedric continued. "The new village and the new houses and the new life couldn't change anything. I think we all gave up at the same time."

Carl turned to Bob and Pete. "I want to apologize to you all. When I took the box away from you underwater, I had no idea. I hope I didn't endanger you."

"Everything went well, Mr Meyers," Pete assured him. Bob nodded in agreement.

"What are you gonna do about it?" Cedric Duff asked in a hushed voice.

"We're going back to Portland," Carl replied. "It's best we go now, then we won't have to spend another night in that hotel in Medford."

"And... after that?" Cedric continued.

Carl and Joan exchanged a look and kept quiet.

"I'm partly responsible for your father's death," Cedric finally brought out. "So are Joe, Daniel and Paul."

"Our father," replied Joan calmly, "is Richard Meyers—the man who adopted us when we were babies. Charlie is... a name we've never heard before. It's good to finally know where we come from and who gave us the money back then. But in the end, it's just a story. We have no connection with Ridgelake... Do you understand, Mr Duff?"

Cedric Duff nodded in confusion.

“Thank you for granting Cassandra’s last wish and writing this letter,” Carl added.

“You thank me,” Cedric said, “and I’m the one who had committed a serious crime...”

“Yes,” Joan replied. “And if I understood the story correctly, you paid for it. You and everybody else.”

Joan stood up and gave her brother a questioning look. He nodded, and then also got up.

“Goodbye,” Joan said, nodded her head and left.

Carl took the diary and followed her. They left the silver box behind.

The next morning, The Three Investigators also said goodbye.

Cedric Duff evaded them as on the first day. After Joan and Carl left, he had barricaded himself in his study and had not come out since.

Darren was completely rattled. “Can’t you stay a little longer?” he asked Jupiter when they had packed their bags.

“We have to go back to school tomorrow, Darren, and it’s gonna be a long drive back.”

“We still have to bring back the diving equipment and everything,” Bob said.

“But... but why am I here alone?” Darren asked desperately. “I’m dying here! Now more than ever! Man, if I’d known this case would end like this... I don’t know what I’d do now.”

Jupe looked perplexed at Pete and Bob. He could understand Darren well. He also didn’t attach great importance to staying in Ridgelake, only one hour longer than necessary... but he still couldn’t change Darren’s situation. “I’m sorry, Darren.”

They left the guest room and went down the stairs. As they passed the door to the study, Jupiter half expected Cedric Duff to come out, but nothing moved.

The sky over Ridgelake was dark and hanging low as The Three Investigators got into the car. Darren looked on with a long, sad face as he watched them. But suddenly, Cedric Duff came out the front door.

“Darren,” he said.

“Yes, Uncle Cedric?” Darren asked uncertainly.

“I just got off the phone with your parents and told them that I’m not feeling well and that I can’t take care of you anymore. They have agreed to let you go to San Francisco to see them right now. They weren’t thrilled, but... well, they don’t have to be.” Cedric Duff smiled for the first time.

Darren’s relief was clear to see... and so was the remorse that immediately followed.

“It’s okay, Darren,” Cedric said. “It wasn’t the truth I told your father. I would have liked to keep you here for a few more days... but I know you’re not comfortable here. I can well understand that. Ridgelake is not the place for a boy. Now run along and pack your things!”

He turned to The Three Investigators. “Can you take Darren with you? You’re all going in the same direction, right?”

“That’s no problem at all, Mr Duff,” Pete assured us. “We’ll pass right by San Francisco!”

Darren had already disappeared into the house. In record time, he had packed his things and came back downstairs. While Pete redistributed the travel bags, Darren said goodbye to his great-uncle. They spoke so softly that the three of them Investigators were unaware of this.

“Have a good trip,” Cedric Duff said, turning and returning to the house before any of them could reply.

On the bumpy main road, The Three Investigators and Darren were on the lookout for the residents of Ridgelake, but came across nobody. Daniel's grocery store had closed, everything in the Rainbow Pub was barricaded, and no one else was around.

They had already left the town centre when they saw someone. Dr Holloway was on foot in the street. Pete stopped beside her and Bob wound down the window on the passenger side.

"Good afternoon, Dr Holloway."

"Hello! Are you leaving us?"

Bob nodded. "And we're taking Darren with us right now."

"It's a shame," said the doctor. "Did your investigation lead to anything?"

Bob hesitated with his answer. Instead, Jupiter said: "Yes, it did. The secret of Ridgelake is solved."

"Really?" Now Dr Holloway leaned in curiously.

But before Jupiter could continue, Darren said: "It's best to ask my great-uncle. Maybe he would like to tell you about the secret. A little company will do him good, I think."

Dr Holloway nodded. "A little company never hurts. You're right, Darren. Well, have a good trip."

"Say hello to Paul Brooks for us," Pete asked.

"I'll do that."

The Three Investigators and Darren said goodbye to Dr Holloway, Bob cranked up the window again, and Pete continued their way across the pothole-strewn road.

Darren looked out the back window until Dr Holloway, then the houses of Ridgelake and finally the top of the church spire disappeared behind the hills.